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HIM: LOVE METAL AT 20
WITHIN TEMPTATION
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GHOST
On Twisted Sister, Venom and The Exorcist
EMPIRE STATE BASTARD
Meet Biffy Clyro's metal love child
COREY TAYLOR
"I've maybe got another five years of touring"
LIFE AFTER METAL
What your favourite musicians did next
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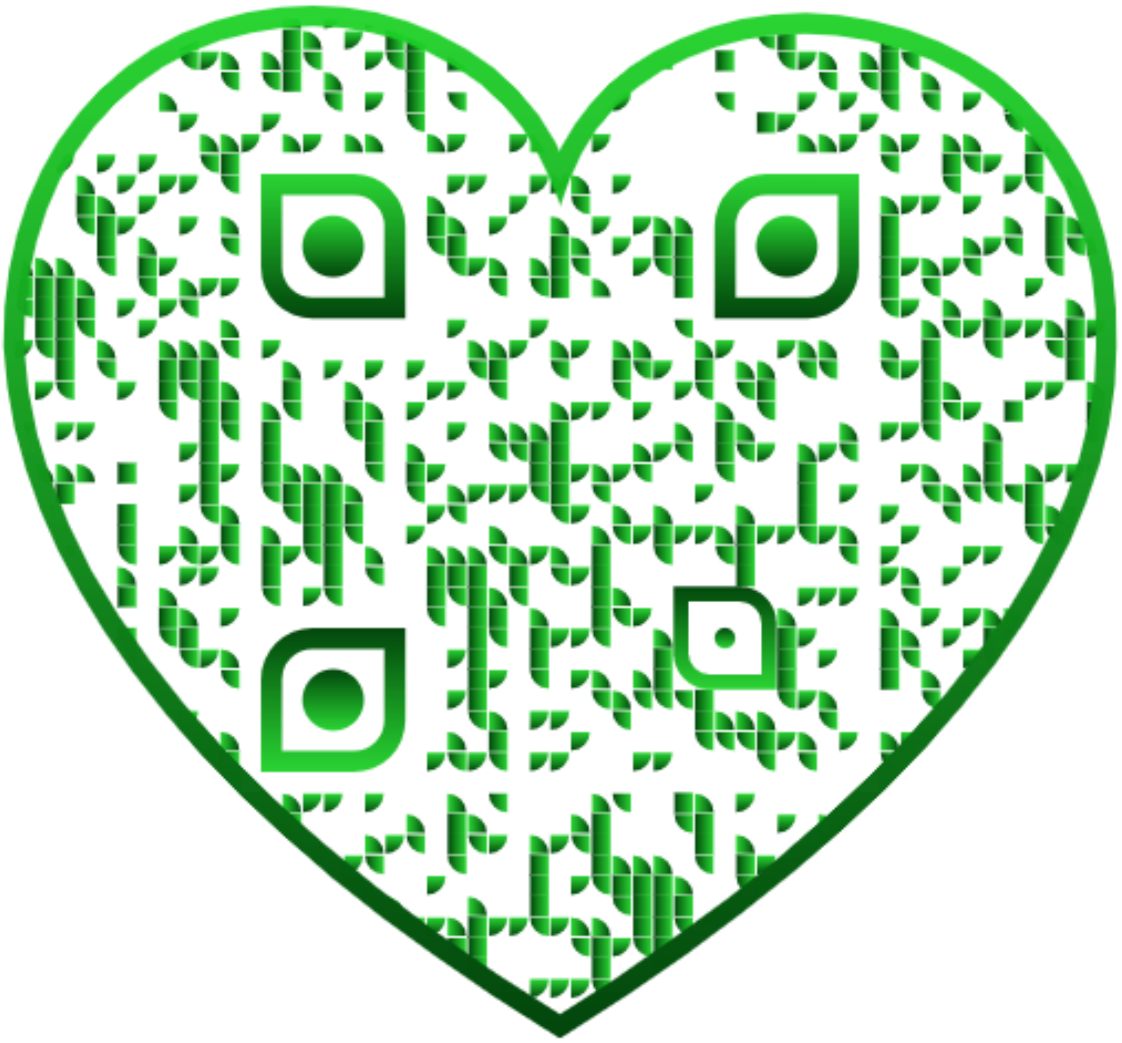
ISSUE 378



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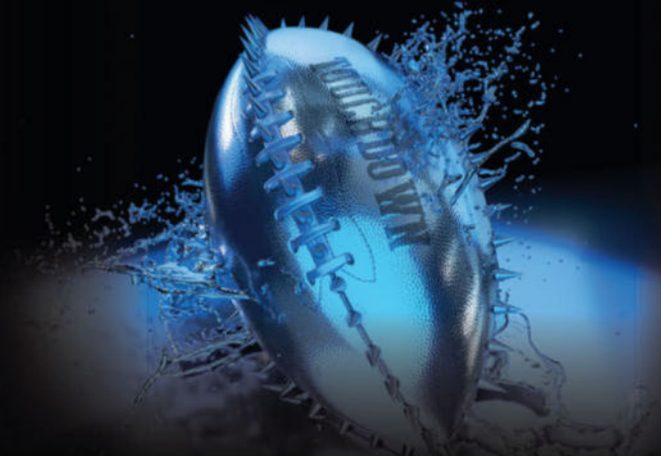

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Head of subscriptions **Sharon Todd**

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Printed by William Gibbons & Sons Ltd on behalf of Future

Distributed by Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU
www.marketforce.co.uk
For enquiries, please email: mfcommunications@futurenet.com

ISSN 0955-1190

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Metal Hammer (ISSN 0955-1190) September, Issue 378, is published monthly with an extra issue in April by Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, UK

The US annual subscription price is $194.87 Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA

Application to Mail at Periodicals Postage Prices is Pending at Brooklyn NY 11256.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Metal Hammer, World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA

Subscription records are maintained at Future Publishing, c/o Air Business Subscriptions, Rockwood House, Perrymount Road, Haywards Heath, West Sussex, RH16 3DH. UK

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Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR)
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WHAT DO YOU STAND FOR?

PIONEERS OF SYMPHONIC metal, Dutch band Within Temptation have built a career on bombastic and sometimes fantastical songs – but they've always had a conscience at their heart. And if 2019's *Resist* began referencing politics more explicitly on tracks such as *The Reckoning* (*'We rise against, we'll always hold the line of reckoning'*), *Bleed Out* is a full-on uprising. Addressing themes such as the Ukraine War, and women's rights in Iran and beyond, it plants their flag firmly in the ground – and what they stand for is freedom for all.

Already well established in our scene, it would have been easy for the band to write some copies of their hits and stick to moderate subject matter, but that's not their style. As frontwoman Sharon den Adel tells our Dannii Leivers in the cover story on p.34: "As an artist you have this platform, and we can talk about bubblegum. But I can also talk about things that matter."

There's a similar call for unity from Skindred on their new album, *Smile* – so we asked Benji Webbe to give us a tour of his hometown, Newport, with serious but also hilarious results (see p.58).

No matter what the state of the world, metal remains the very best type of music in it. Thanks, as always, for reading.

Stay metal,

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EDITOR
@ELEANORGOODMAN

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MEET THE BAND

PAUL BRANNIGAN
WRITER
Paul was there when *Love Metal* broke Him in the UK, introducing the masses to gothic heartthrob Ville Valo. We asked him to get on the phone with his old pal for a trip down memory lane (see p.46).

TINA KORHONEN
PHOTOGRAPHER
We packed long-time *Hammer* snapper Tina off to sunny Newport, where resident and Skindred frontman Benji Webbe gave us a guided tour. By bike. Wearing a crown. Needless to say, her shots on p.58 are perfect.

KEVIN STEWART-PANKO
WRITER
Cult fanzine creator, chronicler of tour disasters with his book, *Do You Have Anything To Declare?* and Canada's longest-standing underground expert, Kevin threw his wisdom at the new album from tech-death countrymen Cryptopsy (p.88).

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14 LORD OF THE LOST

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Head to p.32 for details

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THE BIG PICTURE

BULLS OF STEEL

A GIANT METAL bull named Ozzy has been unveiled at its new home in Birmingham New Street Station. The mechanical sculpture, formerly known as the Raging Bull, was the centrepiece of the opening ceremony at Birmingham's Commonwealth Games last year, where former Black Sabbath guitarist Tony Iommi played. He reunited with bandmate Ozzy Osbourne for a surprise performance at the closing ceremony.

The bull was set to be dismantled following the Games, but won a reprieve after public protests, and was rechristened Ozzy following a public vote. New mechanisms have been installed, so the 10m animal can move its mouth, head, eyes, eyelids and tail – plus speakers so it can roar.

In attendance at the unveiling ceremony in July was Ozzy's wife Sharon, his older sister Jean Powell, and Birmingham 2022 super-heavyweight gold medal winner Delicious Orie. Speaking the previous month, Ozzy said he was "absolutely blown away" by the dedication. "I'm just thrilled to bits. God bless you all. And Birmingham forever."

Sharon Osbourne with some of the women from the Commonwealth Games opening ceremony, who represented the female chain makers of the industrial revolution

PRESS/NETWORK RAIL

THE HOT TOPIC

GOING TO BRAZIL

From gang rivalry to Sepultura's rise, new book *United Forces* explores Brazil's extreme metal scene in the 80s

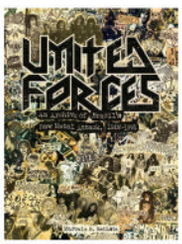
WORDS: CHRIS CHANTLER

Sepultura: a poster for a São Paulo *Schizophrenia* album launch show, with support from Trauma, January 1988

Marcelo Batista launched the *United Forces* zine when he was just a teenager

Eighties thrashers Havoc Savage, later just known as Havoc

FLICKING THROUGH THE 528 beautiful pages of *United Forces: An Archive Of Brazil's Raw Metal Attack 1986-1991* feels like operating a lo-fi time machine. Our destination: mid-80s São Paulo. Our guide: Marcelo Batista, who launched the *United Forces* zine as a teenager and oversaw an era when thrash, hardcore, speed, death and black metal were all spawned simultaneously in an exuberant musical battle. As well as scanned reprints of each original issue – plus a dizzying wealth of photos and flyers – Marcelo provides a commentary on the zine's development and his obsessive immersion in Brazil's extreme metal underground, filtered through the giddy excitement of a kid falling in love with metal.



From his childhood discovery of Kiss to his wide-eyed exploration of Sabbath, Maiden and Priest, Marcelo's experiences will strike nostalgic chords with many readers. But for him, one UK band looms large as the definitive life-altering experience: "Listening to Venom for the first time changed something in me," Marcelo affirms. "That was the band that blew me away!"

> **"THERE WERE GANG FIGHTS AND PEOPLE FREAKING OUT ALL OVER THE PLACE"**
> MARCELO BATISTA

Completely fired up by the frenzied intensification of metal that Venom triggered, Marcelo uncovers a burgeoning national scene full of bands whose perspectives had been similarly exploded by the Tyneside trio.

"My very first underground gig was when Genocídio, Megatério and Brutal played a small pub for a total headbanger audience," Marcelo recalls fondly. "I saw what underground metal was about and got even more involved. The 1986 Venom and Exciter tour brought the first international metal shows to Brazil… [That concert] was the craziest one of that time. Around 10,000 metalheads came, it was an outburst of political repression, gang fights and people freaking out all over the place."

Marcelo's book makes alarmingly clear how much tribal violence existed in those formative times, with open hostility directed towards the headbanging community.

"Loving metal meant rejecting normality and authority," he says. "You could notice those qualities in every guy who wanted to be a metalhead back in the day… Being into metal could put you in a lot of bad situations. I can remember some guys getting out of the metal scene just so they could have a girlfriend, a job, and some respect among family and society."

Looking like a metalhead in public was a perilous situation, but the danger continued even inside the venues.

"It was really scary!" Marcelo emphasises. "I remember one gig, while Vulcano were playing their final song, a friend of mine accidentally hit a guy and broke his tooth. That guy belonged to a local gang, so needless to say my friend was in bad shape. I knew the gang guys, so I tried to pacify the situation and I heard, 'If your friend doesn't get out of here right now, you're both going to get your asses kicked badly.'"

Even so, Marcelo doubts that Brazil's scene could have spilled over into the criminal one-upmanship that made Norwegian black metal infamous.

PRESS/COURTESY OF UNITED FORCES & BAZILLION POINTS

Ratos de Porão in 1986. The band are still active today

Marcelo Batista with Brazilian metal legend Max Cavalera (in a *United Forces* t-shirt) circa 1988

Zhema and Angel of São Paulo's Vulcano

"There was a lot of violence – and some murders, too – but mostly that was caused by gang fights and rivalry between different groups," explains Marcelo. "The Norwegian happenings seemed more like a hierarchical dispute, guys fighting to see who would win the black metal throne. In Brazil we had those kinds of disputes, too, but I never felt it was going to the extreme as in Norway. Here it was more channelled into the music, more like who played the most extreme or who had the more repulsive and radical sound and image."

Brazil's hottest export, Sepultura, were just the tip of the iceberg. Ravening hopefuls like Holocausto, Vulcano, Mutilator, Psychic Possessor, Witchhammer, Sextrash and Sarcófago were frantically smashing any remaining boundaries of taste and restraint with an intensity few Western bands could match. And yet, 80s fans often needed the patience of saints to hear this stuff. It could take months or years to obtain Necrobutcher demos, but today they can be streamed instantly – a scenario that feels rather like Tom Hanks at the end of *Cast Away*, continuously sparking a lighter in amazement after years on an island struggling to make fire with twigs.

Did the music feel more special because of how hard it was to find?

"I often hear my friends expressing this nostalgic feeling, and in some sense, they are not wrong," reckons Marcelo. "When you wanted to listen to something back in the day, and it was such hell to find, the feeling was totally incredible when you finally had it. Nowadays almost everything is so easy to find that the old feeling is nearly totally missed among younger kids. Don't get me wrong, sometimes I get really surprised by young people who still carry that spirit in their hearts. This is a good feeling too." H

***UNITED FORCES...* IS OUT ON SEPT 7 VIA BAZILLION POINTS**

BILLY CORGAN: GETTY

10 THINGS WE LEARNED THIS MONTH

What's been blowing our tiny brains

OZZY PULLED OUT OF POWER TRIP...

He cancelled his big live comeback, due to take place at the California festival in October, as he's "just not ready yet". Take as long as you need, sir!

...BUT JUDAS PRIEST WERE BROUGHT IN INSTEAD!

The Metal God and co. are close personal friends of Ozzy.

GHOST ARE ON THE *INSIDIOUS* SOUNDTRACK

Spooky ghost movie meets spooky Ghost band – surely it's a match made in Heaven?!

Billy Corgan makes a good point

CODE ORANGE TEAMED UP WITH SMASHING PUMPKINS FRONTMAN BILLY CORGAN

New single *Take Shape* feels like the ultimate 90s love letter.

CREED REUNITED...

Reports say Mark Tremonti and co. have welcomed Scott Stapp back with arms wide open.

...AND TARJA TURUNEN REUNITED WITH MARKO HIETALA

The former Nightwish bandmates sang *The Phantom Of The Opera* together at Z7 Summer Nights festival in Switzerland.

JACOBY SHADDIX HAS HIGH HOPES FOR PAPA ROACH, KORN & DEFTONES

In a radio interview, the Papa Roach frontman explained the bands were all "the next Metallicas".

ICE NINE KILLS AND IN THIS MOMENT ARE TOURING THE US TOGETHER

Oh yes. Just imagine the size of that costume budget!

WE CAN'T EXPECT A GARY HOLT SOLO RECORD ANY TIME SOON...

Asked at a fan Q&A, the thrash hero said his focus is entirely on Exodus right now.

...BUT WE MIGHT BE GETTING A NEW SLASH RECORD

The legendary guitarist is reportedly working on a star-studded blues album.

HOW DOES IT FEEL TO START AGAIN?

K.K. Downing is back with KK's Priest – but how will he fare against your questions on guitars, Judas Priest and superior biscuits?

WORDS: CHRIS CHANTLER

AS ONE OF Judas Priest's dual guitarists, K.K. Downing was a key part of the fabric of heavy metal for more than 40 years. But over a decade since his departure from that band, he's back with KK's Priest, reuniting with ex-Priest vocalist Tim 'Ripper' Owens to continue his epic legacy. With a second album on the horizon and tour dates later this year, we flooded him with your questions, which he answered with an instinctive honesty, thoughtfulness and respect (yes, even the one about custard creams).

What can you do in your new group that you couldn't with Judas Priest?
Aidan Rufus, Facebook
"I can call the shots! Ha ha! I'm not looking to do anything particularly different because with my heritage, my legacy and everything that I am, a leopard can't change his spots. I just want to continue doing what I've always done. We got the Judas Priest brand up to a place where it can never be overthrown – it's etched in stone. So yeah, I've got a mountain to climb, but as long as I enjoy it, and the music and performances are strong, there's no reason why the two bands can't coexist happily, like an old married couple!"

How does it feel starting again after such a long career?
Cam Savage, Facebook
"Good question! Did I ever think it'd get to this? Probably not. I was always a bit reluctant, but in 2020 I thought to myself, 'Winter's coming, can I write an album?' I sat down to do it and within four or five weeks it was all mapped out, and I was very pleased with how prolific I could be. That was the main thing: I didn't want to embarrass myself, put a band together then find I couldn't come up with anything. But I surprised myself, and that gave me the confidence to put a band together."

If you could pick three bands to play KK's Steel Mill [a venue K.K. runs in Wolverhampton] that haven't played before, which bands would you pick?
Chris Stewart, Facebook
"Wishbone Ash are a big one. I'm delighted to say that they're coming to the Mill, but it would be nice for them to reform with Ted [Turner] and Laurie [Wisefield] and have three guitarists… imagine that! I was such a heavy little monster that in the early days Wishbone weren't heavy enough for me. But I did think if [Judas Priest] had two guitarists who could both write and play lead and rhythm, maybe we could do a heavy version, and that's the way it went. Scorpions would also be great. Judas Priest, there's another one! Why not? You never know!"

With KK's Priest, K.K. gets to call the shots at last

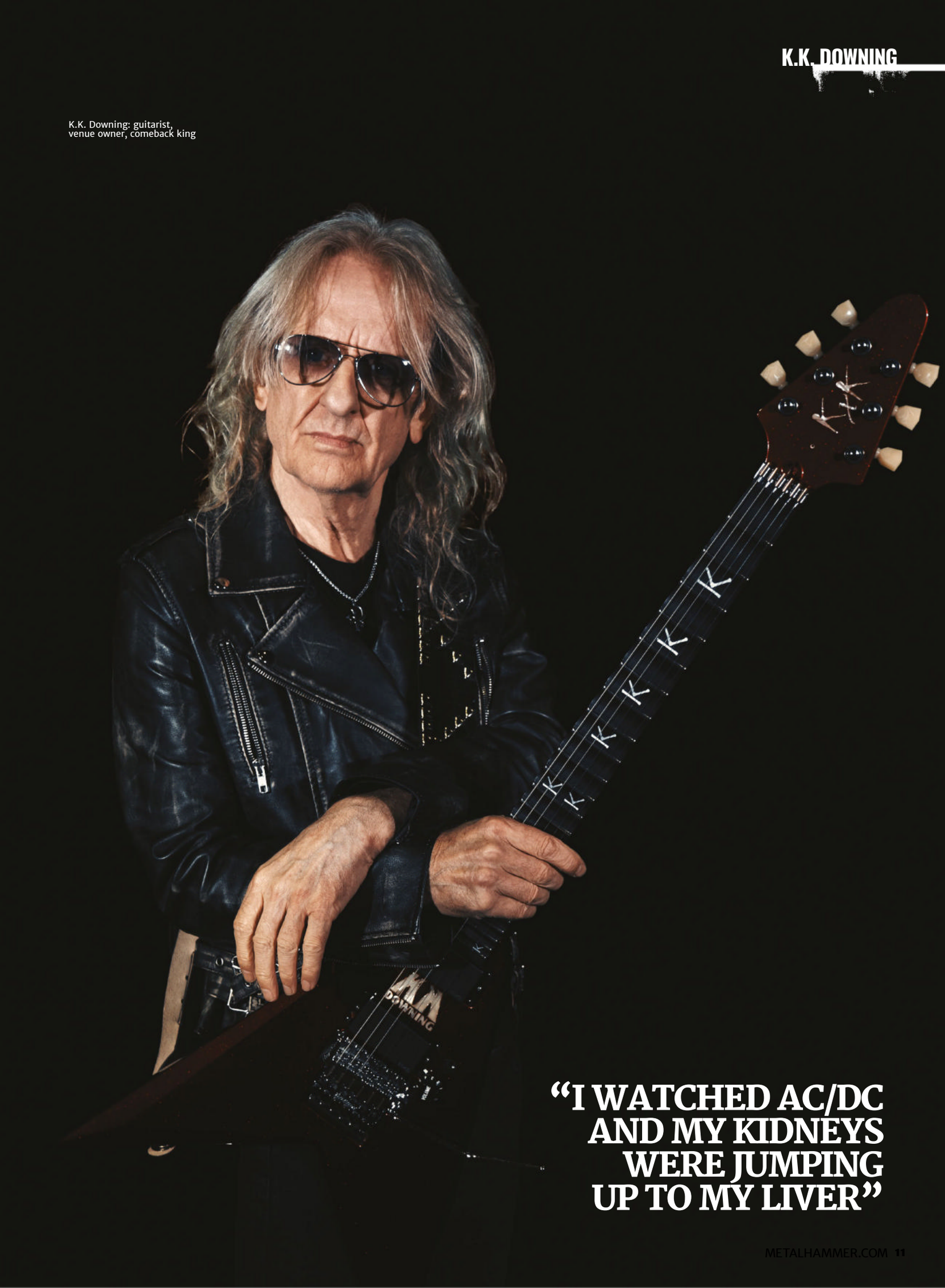
What is your favourite V guitar?
Killer Kobra, Twitter
"I love them all, but for me the epitome was the 1967 Gibson Flying V, because the lines, the cut and the headstock was a bit sharper. To me the '67 was the most beautiful shape. Brian Jones, Dave Davies, Jimi Hendrix, Andy Powell, the Schenkers, they all had one!"

Who is the loudest band you've ever heard live?
Doug McClung, Facebook
"When we played with AC/DC on the Highway To Hell tour, in an ice hockey stadium in Finland, I went down the front to watch them and honestly, my kidneys were jumping up to my liver and getting entwined with my pancreas. It was brutal, man!"

What's the oddest thing a fan has asked you to autograph?
Christopher J. Caron, Facebook
"Not one but *two* newborn babies! There are photos on the internet floating around. We're all sat there, people are lining up with stuff to sign, and there's these two newborns! The parent of the babies was happy for us to actually

PRESS

K.K. Downing: guitarist, venue owner, comeback king



"I WATCHED AC/DC AND MY KIDNEYS WERE JUMPING UP TO MY LIVER"

K.K. prefers chocolate digestives to custard creams (the correct answer – Biscuit Ed)

sign them, of course we had to back off at that point, that's potentially a lawsuit! So we signed the babies' clothes instead. Other than that, there's a lot of body parts we won't get into…"

What's your favourite onstage memory to date?
Rafe Wilde, Facebook
"Supporting Led Zeppelin at Oakland Coliseum in 1977, looking out at 110,000 people! There's been an awful lot since, though. I mean, Live Aid [in 1985]… A couple of us went onstage for the finale; Harry Belafonte was there, Tina Turner, Mick Jagger… *everybody* was there!"

Have you ever broken the law?
Peter McCormack Wixey, Facebook
"I had a parking fine a few days ago! I was a bit of a delinquent as a lad, I went through that phase of wanting a few things that everybody else had but you didn't, and weren't likely to get unless you rifled [stole] them… It was a bit naughty, but luckily I found music and it kept me on the straight and narrow."

How did you feel about nu metal in the 90s?
Adrian Hall, email
"I wasn't a big fan. Glenn [Tipton, Judas Priest guitarist] liked it. He had a son who was just that age at that time, and I think Glenn was playing the role of the cool young dad in tune with the kids, not succumbing to 'old fart syndrome'!"

Will KK's Priest play songs from *Demolition* and *Jugulator* live?
Constantino Darren, Facebook
"We've got one song in the set from *Jugulator*, and we're warming up to do festivals, so… We've been a bit cautious not to dig too deep into the history books, but hopefully we've got a good enjoyable setlist for even the uninitiated. When we play our own shows in October, I could bring songs back from [Judas Priest's 1974 debut] *Rocka Rolla*, I could do anything, as the fans will be there for us."

Did you always hope to work with Ripper again?
Jeffrey Peacock, email
"Yes, I'm hoping we can create something here where Ripper finds a good home. I believe that when he sings this material, he's at his best. His voice can cover anything, but our stuff is a little paced out so he can get the best out of the lyrics and the notes."

Custard creams or milk chocolate digestives?
Andrew's Feeder, Facebook
"Chocolate digestives. Those custard creams have a shelf life that lasts a lifetime, they were always a bit odd!"

Were you offered to rejoin Priest after the Rock & Roll Hall Of Fame?
Joshua Leary, Facebook
"No."

***Hammer*: Would you ever play with them again?**
"No. Before I started KK's Priest, I asked if they'd consider me stepping back into my rightful place, because at one point they announced they were going out as a four-piece. I was expecting to be back in the band when there was an opening, or at least to be asked. But Glenn and Ian [Hill, bassist] wrote through their lawyers saying a flat no, which made no sense, as I was there first. And Rob [Halford] left for 11 years so how does he have the right to say 'I won't consider you re-joining' – I was instrumental in reinstating him into the band! Glenn wasn't interested in having Rob back, he wanted to keep Ripper. But I gave them one last chance, and I was like, 'Are you sure? One day you might live to regret it.' Let's hope they don't."

What's the most you've ever laughed?
Chas Malibu, email
"I hate to say it, but [then-Skid Row frontman] Seb Bach running onstage at Donington [in '92]. We'd had a bit of rain, and he's such a lanky guy, he went so arse over tit his legs seemed to be six feet in the air! It's like he was doing backwards cartwheels! He's a fantastic vocalist and a lovely guy, but that was one of the funniest things ever."

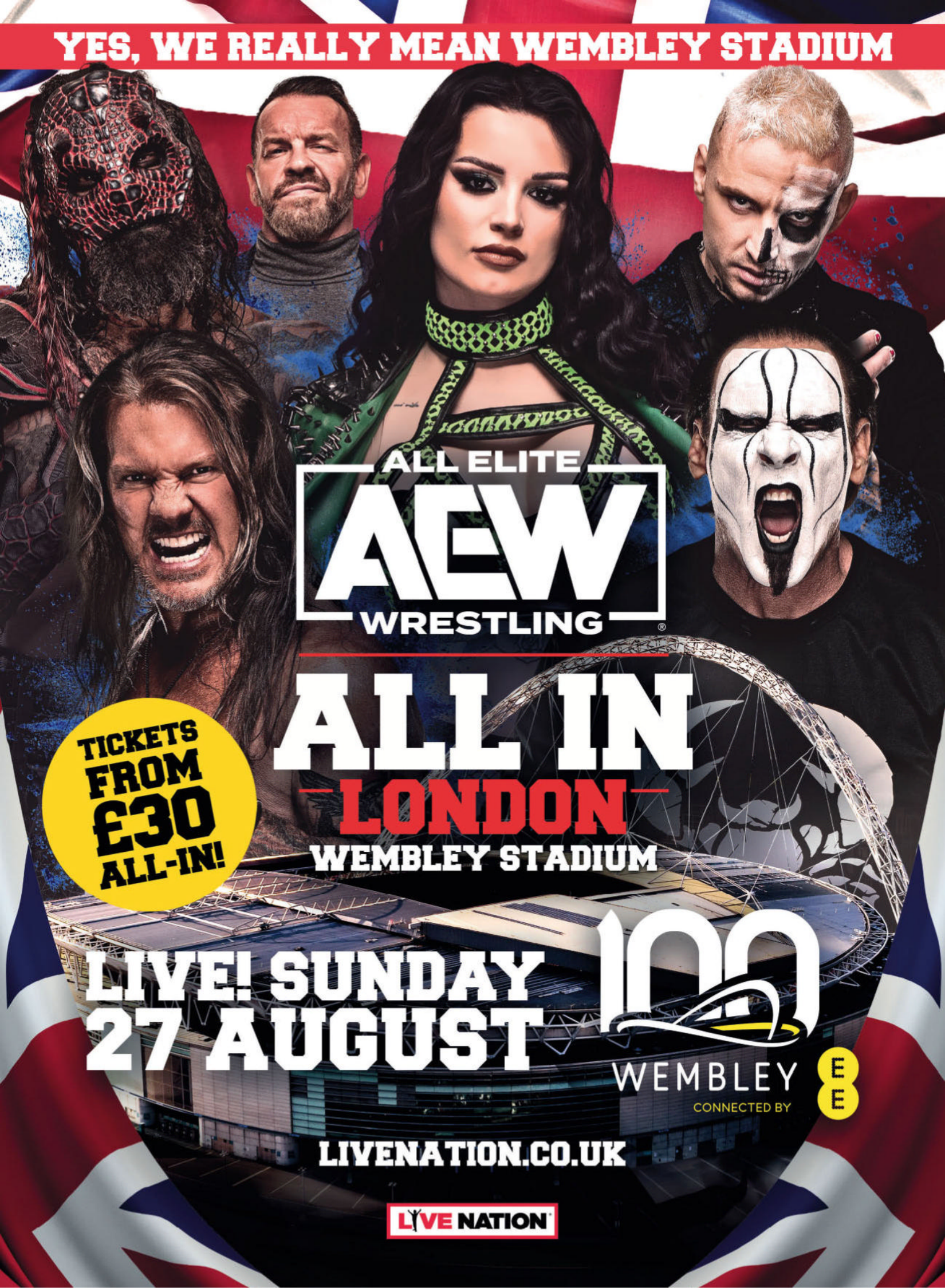
Are you superstitious?
Mrs Cravat, email
"No. It's been conjured up out of the imagination, like so many other things. Until it's proved to me that it exists, I don't consider it to be real. I've always been like that; it's why I've never been religious or believed in life after death."

What is your advice to young bands just starting out?
Kenny Elevenses, email
"It's tough to break through, just keep working at it. Choose your bandmates carefully, because it's all about staying the course. Try to pick people who'll make sacrifices. I remember Al Atkins, our first singer, he had a wife and kid and when there wasn't enough money there, he needed a full-time job, and it took him away from the band." H

"A FAN WANTED US TO SIGN TWO NEWBORN BABIES!"

***THE SINNER RIDES AGAIN* IS OUT SEPTEMBER 29. KK'S PRIEST TOUR THE UK IN OCTOBER**

PRESS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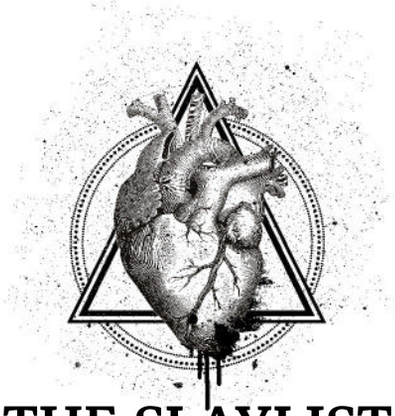

THE SLAYLIST

CHRIS HARMS

Aerosmith, Iron Maiden and Soilwork have all left their mark on Lord Of The Lost's larger-than-life frontman

WORDS: EMILY SWINGLE

Chris Harms owes it all to *Creep*

"I'VE NEVER BEEN a huge fan of **RADIOHEAD**, but the song *Creep* changed my life. It was 1993, and I was 13 years old watching MTV. Suddenly, this soft, melodic song comes on, that then builds up to this super-hard, fuzzy guitar sound. Those short little bursts that come in before the chorus… I had never heard that before. In that moment, I decided I *needed* an electric guitar, so I asked for one for my next birthday. **AEROSMITH**'s *Amazing* was also huge for me when I was 13. It's basically a rock ballad with orchestral elements. I've been playing classical cello since the age of five, so hearing those two heavy and classical worlds put together… it totally changed how I think of music. Lord Of The Lost have released albums with orchestral elements, and I think this was the first song that led me that way.

"Similarly, that same year my sister's cool surfer boyfriend would always put on **BILLY IDOL**'s *Cyberpunk* in his open-top convertible. *Shock To The System* was another track that made me see how interesting rock could be. It was the first time I was exposed to industrial, glitchy sounds. Talking of Billy Idol, I've always loved glam rock – my parents had a lot in their vinyl collection. Even though it was in their collection, I didn't really listen to **DAVID BOWIE**'s *Ziggy Stardust* record until I was older. I was more fascinated by the visuals as a kid. But in the early 2000s, I had a girlfriend who would always put the record on loop, and we actually kissed for the first time during *Starman*. It made me re-experience David Bowie for the first time – it was magic.

"Another record that I have looped a lot in my life is **HELLOWEEN**'s *Keeper Of The Seven Keys Pt II*. One summer I met a guy who drove a beat-up car – it had one door, and the cassette deck was jammed. You couldn't get the tape out, you were just condemned to rewind and listen again. And so we listened to *Eagle Fly Free* all summer long. But I never stopped being fascinated by how melodic it was, yet still heavy. I actually ended up having Kai Hansen of Helloween as a studio partner in Hamburg eventually, running things together. He knows about the cassette.

"I've also chosen a track by **THE DARKNESS**, because my friend once convinced me to go and see them in Hamburg – it's the first and last time I've ever been front row. A day after the gig, we founded our own glam rock band, The Pleasures. So I'd say *I Believe In A Thing Called Love* is a special song for me, since it started up that band.

"It's pretty cool that we've toured with **IRON MAIDEN** twice now. I bought *The Number Of The Beast* album at a flea market in Berlin – and I actually need to get it signed by the band, really! I have '*666*' and '*TNOTB*' tattooed on the sides of my hands. The title track was probably the first time I ever heard weird polyrhythmic stuff going on in a track. I was like, 'What the fuck is going on?' When I first listened to **SLIPKNOT**'s debut album, I thought a pretty similar thing. I skipped the intro track… and then *(sic)* just absolutely violated me. It felt so extreme, with all these clashing rhythms and sounds. It made me get more daring with my sound, more willing to experiment.

"**SOILWORK**'s *One With The Flies* inspired me in a different way – more of a nerdy one. The drummer plays on the offbeats. It's a staple of 70s disco beats, but rather than using hi-hats, he performs it on a China cymbal which is much heavier. I try to emulate that bouncy feeling a lot. Finally, **ROXETTE**'s *Sleeping In My Car*. Roxette were my first concert, but also it's the song that was playing when I first had sex with my first girlfriend… I think that says it all. I wish I could say we had the song on repeat for a whole hour but…"

LISTEN NOW
To hear Chris's choices, head to tinyurl.com/LordOfTheList

"ROXETTE'S *SLEEPING IN MY CAR* WAS PLAYING WHEN I FIRST HAD SEX"

***BLOOD & GLITTER* IS OUT NOW. LORD OF THE LOST TOUR THE UK IN SEPTEMBER**

PRESS

IN THE STUDIO

SVALBARD

Britain's premier blackened post-metallers are going extra dark with album number four

WORDS: DANNII LEIVERS

Serena: not afraid of going in hard with Svalbard's music

SINCE THEY EMERGED in 2011, Svalbard have cemented themselves as one of UK metal's brightest – and most outspoken – hopes. Through their blackened post-metal, the Bristol band have tackled issues such as abortion rights, misogyny, revenge porn and mental health. Freshly signed to Nuclear Blast, *Hammer* caught up with Serena Cherry and Liam Phelan to find out what to expect from the follow-up to 2020's stunning *When I Die, Will I Get Better?*.

So where are Svalbard going sonically on your new album?
Serena [vocals/guitar]: "I'd say we've dug even deeper on this album, both musically and lyrically. There are new instruments that we've never used before. Liam played some violin on this one! In terms of the sound, it's a cliché to say the album is even heavier, but it certainly isn't softer, put it that way."
Liam [vocals/guitar]: "The heavier bits are more aggressive. The guitars sound really direct, and all the softer sections sound even dreamier. And even though it's more expansive, it all fits together very well. I think it's very cohesive."
Serena: "It's a bit Jekyll and Hyde. When we're going hard, look out."

What made you want to experiment?
Serena: "We wrote a song that was intended to be a bonus track, originally. Once Liam added all his layers of violin, we all sat there thinking, 'Wow, this sounds like a completely different song.'"
Liam: "We tried [violin] on the last album, but it didn't sound right. This time, everything fell into place, and it felt really natural, like it was elevating Svalbard into something else. It was exciting to see it build into something better than you could imagine."

What are the new songs about?
Serena: "Lyrically, this is not a political record. It's more inward and emotional. I'd liken it to walking down a dark path and confronting your own demons within your head. There are two themes on this album – mental illness and love – and how those two things impact on each other, usually in a negative way, and the kind of isolation that accompanies struggling with mental illness. It's a very inward-looking record. It's all about me. It's not about anything going on outside the walls within my own head."

The last album was written at a very difficult time in your life, Serena. Is there more hope on this album?
Serena: "I'd say it's *less* hopeful! There's not a ray of sunshine or hope in this album at all. If *When I Die, Will I Get Better?* was a journey through a tunnel with the light at the end, this is the opposite. This is, 'You've had a glimpse of the light and now you're back in the tunnel, walking through towards the train.'"

Was it a difficult album to make?
Serena: "I think it's therapeutic now that it's done. It's that transformative power of music, where you can take all your worst thoughts and your inner demons, and release them into a song that becomes the flower blossoming from a pile of shit."

Serena, since the last Svalbard record you recorded your own BM project, Noctule. Did you learn anything from that process that you've brought back into your work with Svalbard?
Serena: "Going from writing an album completely by yourself to coming back in with the band really reinvigorated my love of working with other people. But also, when I was recording Noctule, I was very hard on myself with the vocals. I did so many takes to develop my vocal to be the best it could be, and I think that has carried over onto this album. This is the first Svalbard album where I haven't lost my voice when we've recorded it. It's not just screaming for the sake of making a noise. I developed my technique to really convey the emotions in the lyrics." H

SVALBARD'S NEW ALBUM, *THE WEIGHT OF THE MASK*, WILL BE RELEASED ON OCTOBER 6 VIA NUCLEAR BLAST

THE FACTS

ALBUM:
4

STUDIO:
The Ranch, Southampton, UK

PRODUCER:
Lewis Johns

EXPECT:
Post-metal on steroids. Svalbard's visceral, pitch-black palette taken to the extreme

PRESS

LIFE LESSONS

TOBIAS FORGE

Shock rock, bad glam bands and wanting to be Venom: inside the brain of Ghost's benevolent overlord

WORDS: RICH HOBSON

TOBIAS FORGE IS the mastermind behind one of the 21st century's hottest metal bands, but even he'll admit that success was a long time in the making. Hailing from the Swedish city of Linköping, the Ghost frontman dabbled in everything from death metal to glam before donning the iconic Papal attire and paint to transform into Papa Emeritus, transcending his roots to become a larger-than-life character. Here are the key parables he has to share, gleaned from more than 25 years on the heavy metal frontlines.

MUSIC AND MOVIES ARE GATEWAYS TO OTHER WORLDS

"Linköping was a nice city to grow up in. It wasn't so small you felt like you were cramped in a village, but it's small enough that you'd still want to eventually move somewhere else. You'd have access to all these gateways to other worlds through the record stores and the local video store. My dreams started there – everything I do now, I dreamt back there."

I WAS A TEENAGE HEADBANGER

"I had a teenage brother growing up, so I had a free pass into teenage culture. Whatever they consumed, I got a whiff of – how they dressed, what they watched on TV, what films they rented… The lifestyle and expression that meant most to me was shock rock. Twisted Sister were a wrecking ball into my life with *I Wanna Rock*. That song made me want to bounce!"

THE HEAVIER IT GOT, THE DEEPER I WANTED TO GO

"When I first heard Candlemass, I was eight and I was *blown away*. I already liked Black Sabbath, Metallica and Motörhead through my brother, but Candlemass were local and sounded so heavy, it was like doomsday. King Diamond and Candlemass served as a segue for me to discover death metal and black metal in the early 90s. It became my calling. From the ages of 12 to 22, I spent my life in death and black metal bands."

FOLLOW YOUR HEART (AND SOMETIMES YOUR WALLET)

"My mom is from Stockholm, so when I was 15 and started saying I wanted to move there, she was just like 'Finish mandatory school' and we moved together [after I graduated]. I moved back to Linköping when I was 25, because Stockholm is a big metropolitan place and it's not fun living in those places if you don't have money. Now I'm in Stockholm again; it's more fun now I can afford it!"

HEAD IN THE CLOUDS, FEET ON THE GROUND

"I learned the hard way in the late 90s that wanting to play 80s-inspired death metal with my band Repugnant was painfully out of touch with what was going on at the time. It broke my heart; I wanted us to be signed to Roadrunner and support Slayer. That never happened unfortunately – or perhaps fortunately, as it kept me grounded for a few more years and if those things had happened maybe I wouldn't be here today."

TAKE CHANCES, BUT STAND YOUR GROUND

"Repugnant had a close shave with success. We signed to the label Hammerheart, which at the time felt like we'd made it because the first thing they did was take us out on our first tour, supporting the American band Macabre. They were a favourite band of ours – still are, and whenever we play Chicago they come to the shows – and at that point it felt like we might be going somewhere, but we quickly parted ways with Hammerheart because we couldn't agree. It felt like our chance and we'd blown it."

"I WANTED REPUGNANT TO BE SIGNED TO ROADRUNNER AND SUPPORT SLAYER"

NOT ALL 80S BANDS WERE CREATED EQUAL

"With Crashdïet, we never really went beyond our home. I can't say how many shows we did, but I don't think it was more than a handful. For me especially there was conflict with the singer, Dave Lepard. We were friends, but he clearly wanted to take his band into some sort of glam-sleaze direction, whereas when I think of 'glam', I'm more Hanoi Rocks and Guns N' Roses – never, *ever* the other bands. I know Poison kinda came before a lot of the latecomers, but to me they were repellent. Dave wanted to go all neon and I wanted it so that if we were glam, we'd be Hanoi Rocks meets Lords Of The New Church or The Dead Boys. I don't want to be fucking Stryper! Fuck that!"

THERE'S NO POINT TRYING TO FOLLOW FASHION

"It was a confusing time in the early 2000s – rock was all of a sudden in fashion because of bands like Franz Ferdinand and Kaiser Chiefs. Everyone was always looking for the next big rock band and in Sweden The Hives were *huge*, as were The Soundtrack Of Our Lives, The Hellacopters, Backyard Babies… so many rock bands! But there we were in Subvision, influenced by The Dead Boys, with a little-too-long hair, leather jackets, just a little too 'metal'… yuck! You're supposed to be more indie; heavy metal is about having the biggest dick and indie is the opposite."

FIRST IMPRESSIONS REALLY DO COUNT

"I hated The Strokes when they first came out. Back then, everyone described them as being so natural, that they weren't interested in being rock stars, and I was like, 'No. They didn't wake up looking like *that*.' They chose to do that to be rock stars. And they can really play! Then when *First Impressions Of Earth* came out it was like, 'There you go! *That's* what they really sound like! After that, I loved The Strokes, because they were showing they actually did love the music, but a lot of indie rockers treated it like it was their sell-out record."

HAVE A VISION IN MIND

"Ghost started with a song, *Stand By Him*, which ultimately came out on our first record. I wrote it spontaneously, as an experiment – almost a joke, if you will, in 2006. When I recorded it the first time, I had no equipment in my home, so I had to go to a friend's house. We did this very rough demo. He said it was great. He'd been in Subvision, Repugnant and Crashdïet with me, but we'd stopped playing together. He was like, 'Can we form a new band?' and I was like, 'This song is the only thing I have. If I can come up with two more ▶

PRESS/JIMMY HUBBARD

Not winging it:
Tobias has a plan

It's a long way from Repugnant, but we love him for it

KATJA OGRIN

"HEAVY METAL IS ABOUT HAVING THE BIGGEST DICK AND INDIE IS THE OPPOSITE"

songs and there's a pattern, then of course.' But they needed to be as playful and spontaneous, and sure enough they were."

PRESSURE CAN DO WONDERS

"Around 2008, when Ghost were first getting properly started, my girlfriend told me she was pregnant with twins. I never said it out loud, but I was preparing for my dream not coming true – maybe I wouldn't become a rock star, I'd never be successful… So I had to at least have something that I could live with, a hobby that I could feel strongly about and get all my inclinations filtered through. I wanted to play metal, but also write pop music, have this horror rock show with theatre… Still taking inspiration from Venom pictures in 1982 where they looked like bikers surrounded by smoke and red lights. Ghost felt like a combination of all those things. Lo and behold, when I didn't have all the time in the world, like I had before and gotten nowhere, when I could only put so much effort in, everything changed."

THE MYTHOS IS NICE, BUT ONLY THE MUSIC MATTERS

"It was so weird, being threatened with a 'reveal' [Tobias's public identity was revealed after ex-members took legal action against him in 2017], as if people knowing who I was would be such a turn-off that they'd never listen to Ghost again. Here I am, most of my life wanting to be known, but then I was fighting to be unknown? What a paradox!"

ROLL WITH THE PUNCHES

"I've always tried to be like a general – have a goal, like, 'Let's take that castle', but knowing that things can change in the field. You need to conduct yourself with a certain level of elasticity. I know I'm a control freak and want things to be done in a certain way, but I'm also aware things never work out that way."

CHALLENGE YOURSELF

"One of the biggest weaknesses with modern metal – and horror – is that it's being created and curated by people who only like that thing, so it becomes regurgitation. The best horror movies I've seen – *Jaws, Bram Stoker's Dracula, The Exorcist, The Omen* – were made by people who never made horror films elsewhere. They wouldn't limit themselves. If you don't like other things, that's fine, but if you ever feel stuck creatively it might just be that you're sticking too close to home. I can't even imagine just sticking to one lane these days."

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THE STORY BEHIND

SOLITUDE
CANDLEMASS

Recorded in a bomb shelter, the song that introduced Candlemass to the world is less about Armageddon or loneliness than killer hangovers

WORDS: DAVE EVERLEY

WHEN LEIF EDLING founded doom pioneers Candlemass in the Swedish municipality of Upplands Väsby in late 1984, he had one mission. "We wanted to be the heaviest band in the world," says the bassist. "We wanted to be heavier and more metal than anyone."

Candlemass made good on that promise. Their grandiose, distinctly northern European sound was best encapsulated on *Solitude*, the magnificent opening track of their 1986 debut album, *Epicus Doomicus Metallicus*. This half-speed symphony of sadness was the perfect marriage of heaviness and grandeur, an epic wail of desolation that still stands as a doom metal landmark nearly 40 years after its release. As Leif puts it: "*Solitude* is our *Paranoid*."

The bassist had formed Candlemass from the ashes of his previous band, Nemesis, with drummer Matz Ekström. The pair spent all their spare krona at Stockholm record shop Heavy Sounds, picking up the latest albums from the likes of Venom, Motörhead and Iron Maiden. But it was underground bands such as Trouble, Saint Vitus, Manilla Road and Warlord that shaped Candlemass's nascent sound more than anything.

"Most Swedish bands at the time had a more commercial sound," says Leif. "We got our sound and unique style pretty fast. No one sounded like us."

That sound followed the proto-doom template laid down in the early 70s by Black Sabbath and their cult US cousins Pentagram. But where Candlemass's transatlantic contemporaries Saint Vitus and Trouble made music for biker and dive bars, the Swedes' music had a grandeur that evoked sweeping mountains and Scandinavian forests.

"We wanted to make doom metal of epic proportions," says Leif. "That's why we called the album *Epicus Doomicus Metallicus*."

Leif had already written the songs that would appear on the album when he came up with a quick, off-the-cuff riff.

"I wrote it in a minute or two," he recalls. "I played it to Matz, and he immediately said, 'You have to write a full song based on that riff, and it has to go on the album.'"

It didn't take long for Leif to put meat on the bones of the riff and turn it into a proper song.

"I had to deliver it ASAP because we were about to make the album," he says. "I didn't spend much time on it. It was one of those songs that more or less writes itself. All of a sudden, there it was: 'Bam! I give you *Solitude*!'"

Lyrically, *Solitude* found Leif dredging the bleakest depths of his soul. The opening lines (*'I'm sitting here alone in darkness/Waiting to be free'*) are a portent of something terrible to come, while the song's howled hook – *'Please let me die in solitude!'* – suggests the whole thing is a study of mental anguish and suicidal ideation. Except it's nothing of the sort.

Candlemass (left to right): Leif Edling, Mats Björkman, Matz Ekström

"The lyrics came about when I was really hungover," says Leif with a laugh. "I usually wrote lyrics on a Sunday because I had a free day, and I was often in a shitty shape after going to the local pub the night before. The lyrics were about feeling crap and kind of wanting to die because you felt so terrible. But you write something personal, and then it goes off in another direction."

Candlemass were still a trio at that point, consisting of Matz Ekström, guitarist Mats Björkman and Leif himself. Initially, the latter pulled double duty as singer and bassist.

"But my voice wasn't great, and it's also a bitch to sing and play bass at the same time," he says. "In those early days, we were always on the hunt for a singer. I almost sang on *Epicus...*, but luckily we found Johan before I could do any damage."

PRESS

THE FACTS

RELEASED: 1986

ALBUM: *Epicus Doomicus Metallicus*

PERSONNEL: Leif Edling (bass), Matz Ekström (drums), Mats Björkman (guitar), Johan Längqvist (vocals)

"Johan" was Johan Längqvist, a singer whose previous band, Jonah Quizz, had split up a few years earlier. Johan had a powerful, near-operatic voice that put most other metal singers in the shade in terms of range and tone. He was an 11th-hour recruit – Matz Ekström had only persuaded him to appear on the album a few days before they were due to enter Stockholm's Thunderload Studios in February 1986. The first time Leif met Johan was on the first day of recording.

"It was insane," says the bassist. "And then he came in and blew us away."

Thunderload was located in an old bomb shelter below Stockholm's Universitetet metro station. The conditions were less than conducive for making an album.

"It was cold and damp and we had to wear long johns and gloves down there," remembers Leif. "You could see your breath coming out of your mouth. It wasn't easy for playing and recording. We couldn't even tune our guitars. And we had to piss in a small, red bucket in a corner. But Ragne [Wahlquist, producer] was very patient with us. He taught us what to do and what not to do."

"WE WANTED TO BE THE HEAVIEST BAND IN THE WORLD"

LEIF EDLING

One person who did know what to do was Johan Längqvist.

"He nailed *Solitude* right away, in a take or maybe two," says Leif. "He was like the God of Singing. We had goosebumps listening to him."

Leif planned to open the album with another song, *Demon's Gate*, but Matz was insistent it was the wrong choice.

"He said, 'It must be *Solitude*!' He was absolutely right."

Freezing temperatures and inhospitable studio environs aside, Candlemass had delivered a killer album. There was just one problem. Johan had agreed to appear on the record as a session singer but that was all. There was no chance he was going to tour in support of it. This potentially ruinous situation proved to be a blessing in disguise. His replacement was Messiah Marcolin, a larger-than-life character with a paint-peeling voice and a shock of

Candlemass proved there was more to the 80s than the likes of Poison and Mötley Crüe

"I'M SURE IT WILL BE PLAYED AT MY FUNERAL"

LEIF EDLING

curly hair who would appear onstage in full monk's robes performing his signature move, the 'doom dance' – a slo-mo stomp performed in time to Candlemass's tectonic-plate riffs.

"We were this ultra-heavy band with a mad monk onstage," says Leif. "Word spread pretty quickly."

Not quickly enough, though. Few people bought *Epicus Doomicus Metallicus* when it was released in June 1986 on Swedish indie label Black Dragon.

"It bombed," says Leif. "It didn't sell much and we got dropped."

But Candlemass weren't about to quit. Dismal record sales aside, the band's epic music – together with Messiah's unique stage presence – was catching on, and they began building an audience. *Solitude* became the band's calling card, in all its depressive glory.

"People started to talk about it," says Leif. "At the time, it was about the lyrics or the weird note in the riff. Whenever we played it live, it always brought down the roof of every venue. People often say that *Solitude* is so slow, but if you listen to it, it has a beat that compels you to nod your head or stamp your foot or whatever. We did it on purpose. No song should be so slow that you can't bang your head to it, and there's something about *Solitude* that makes people go off and sing along to it. It has some kind of secret power."

Set against hair metal's party-hard hedonism and thrash's raging drunkenness, the bleakness of the song's lyrics was part of its appeal. Whether intended or not, *Solitude* could be read as a glorification of suicide. It's something Leif pushes back against.

"I don't think it's that depressing actually," says Leif.

"Of course you can read just about anything into any song if you want to, but it's not a pro-suicide song," he insists. "It's just about how bad you can feel when you drank too much the night before. Simple as that. And it's not my thing to write a suicide anthem. I'm a much more positive person than that. Lots of fans over the years have told me that they love it and feel uplifted after listening to it. And you can really headbang to it too."

Candlemass followed up *Solitude* and *Epicus Doomicus Metallicus* with a string of equally classic albums, including 1987's *Nightfall* and 1988's *Ancient Dreams*. Since then, there have been multiple splits, hiatuses and reunions, and countless line-up changes. Leif Edling has been the only constant, though original vocalist Johan Längqvist returned in 2016 as a full-time member, singing on 2019's *The Door To Doom* and 2022's *Sweet Evil Sun*. But it's the epic anthem inspired by a monster hangover almost 40 years ago that remains both Candlemass's greatest five minutes and 38 seconds and one of the foundational doom metal songs.

"All of a sudden we are legends and feel fucking old at the same time! Ha ha ha!" says Leif. "People say it's a classic and I feel good about that. It means you did something worth remembering. And I never get tired of *Solitude*. I'm sure it will be played at my funeral."

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YOUR SHOUT

WE DEMAND BEEF!

…and other requests, pleas, protests and praises you had to offer on our massive 2000s issue!

Fred Durst: drama? As if!

NAUGHTIES

A whole issue dedicated to the 2000s, but where's the drama? This was when rock stars were proper rock stars, not whiny crybabies! I miss when bands would talk about getting fucked-up and sniping at each other in interviews. Where's Mushroomhead v Slipknot? We demand beef!

Andy Guy, email

The issue opened with Fred Durst blowing up a boat. How much more drama do you need?!

THE HEAVIEST MATTERS IN THE UNIVERSE

Gojira's pro-environmental and pro-indigenous people message is one of my favourite aspects of their music. Love to hear when legendary musicians are also activists.

TheDarkAdmiral1, Twitter

We couldn't agree more – and as frontman Joe Duplantier told us, he's been doing this since he was a teenager, so there's no questioning how dedicated he is to the cause(s)!

HEAVEN BESIDE YOU

We met at the Johan Cruijff Arena at Day 1 of Metallica [MHR375] and got interviewed. Was totally blown away by seeing my picture in the magazine!! I saw the little tidbit further on in the feature: "We don't see Neal again but imagine he is in heaven!" It was so true – I happened to be standing right beside where Lars's kit rose from the stage. What a great event!

Neal Fitzpatrick, email

We're glad to hear our prediction was true, Neal, and that you had an incredible time!

BALLERINAS WEAR BOOTS

Got my tickets for the Black Sabbath ballet – absolutely buzzing! Can't wait to see how it's all going to come together.

Han Bea, email

It's certainly an interesting one, Han, and we're sure you're not the only one excited to see what the final product looks like. Our experience at the preview suggests it'll be good and loud at any rate!

GOD SAVE THE SCENE

Seen Heriot a number of times, very impressed with them. Also seen Ithaca and Wargasm live and enjoyed them both. Good to see new bands getting air and word time.

Steve Airey, Facebook

We're glad you liked our feature on the new heavy bands making British music so exciting at the moment, Steve! We dare say we only scratched the surface too – it seems there are fantastic British bands leading the way for just about every genre right now.

LOVE AT FIRST FRIGHT

Really loved the Murderdolls back in the day. I became friends with this cool dude for a few years… twas one of those unlikely friendships as he was basically a soccer hooligan who listened to Kanye West exclusively and I was a metalhead. One day

#TWEETS

NO GODS NO MASTERS ONLY TANGO ICE BLAST
Djamila Azzouz, Ithaca (@djamilayasmin)

I refuse to work with unripened avocados! It's just not worth it.
Nick Holmes, Paradise Lost/ Bloodbath (@NickHolmesPL)

I'm way too pretty to have this many sad feelings all the time
Scene Queen (@scenequeenrocks)

"You will never find a more wretched hive, of scum and villainy." – Obi-Wan Kenobi said this of Mos Isley [sic], but it certainly applies to just about any airport in the world.
David Draiman, Disturbed (@davidmdraiman)

The best part of playing shows is dressing up in outfits tbh
Backxwash (@Backxwash)

GETTY

Murderdolls: the great unifiers?

I passed him an earphone and stuck Murderdolls on thinking he'd recoil the second I hit play. For about four years before I moved away we'd meet up once a month and he'd have their whole collection lined up on his surround sound every single time. Hats off to them for getting that to happen.
Oisin O Madagain, Facebook

That's a great story, Oisin, and a perfect example of the unifying powers of heavy metal!

SICK TRICKS

Sick New World was a phenomenal time and festival for me and the people I went with. Yes, there were some issues with a few stages, but overall that didn't take away anything from the great time I was having. Would absolutely go back if they do it again.
Nathen Villanueva, Facebook

Our writer certainly had a few misgivings, but we're glad you had a great time, Nathen. It just goes to show, no experience is universal!

LIMP-PIN

Dino Cazares joining Limp Bizkit wouldn't work, I agree. Not because either of them are bad, they're just a bad match.
Macan Wigit Sumnuruddin, Facebook

It's certainly a weird one to think about, though the way we see it, it just means we got to have *both* Limp Bizkit and Fear Factory in the 00s.

NU CHOICE

The 2000s issue is me all over. I saw it yesterday. Deffo getting iiiit! Started liking metal in, like, '06/'07! Nu metal in '02 but serious stuff then.
Pete Adamson, Facebook

We're glad you approve, Pete – there's certainly enough iconic bands, albums and events from the 2000s that we reckon we could have done the mag twice over and still not fit it all in!

THE BIG DEBATE

Avenged Sevenfold's M. Shadows suggested that new technology and production tricks were "killing the genre". Needless to say, not everybody agreed and some people had their own theories on where metal is going wrong in 2023…

HE SAID

"Technology overuse is killing metal and killing rock. Everyone's using the same samples, they're using the same tools to fill out the speakers, they're brickwalling their mixes… the normal person that listens to that, they're like, 'This just sounds like one straight line of *something*.'"

YOU SAY

"I agree. That's why bands like Sleep Token will be irrelevant in a few years. Not that I'd like that to happen."
Krystian Łęczyński, Facebook

"No. Gatekeeping is killing rock. Metalheads became the close-minded people they used to mock and then wonder why fewer young people like the genre year after year."
Kakarot D. Elric, Twitter

"He's right. I haven't heard anything powerful and raw and gritty in SO long. Everything sounds emotionless. They're following a recipe rather than coming from a place of heart and creativity."
Tim Davenport, Facebook

"Metal and rock are evolving. These are exciting times."
MvL, Twitter

"I personally think the oversaturation and lack of decent motivation is killing the genre."
Levi Peterson, Facebook

"Trent Reznor would disagree."
Brad Meyers, Facebook

JOIN THE BIG DEBATE AT FACEBOOK.COM/GROUPS/METALHAMMERREADERS

HAMMER STEREO

What's been blowing our office speakers

SHEPHERDS REIGN
Ala Mai
"Polynesian culture collides with groove metal to fierce effect. When it hits, it hits"
ELEANOR GOODMAN
EDITOR

CRYPTOPSY
As Gomorrah Burns
"Ever gone 10 rounds with a robo-kangaroo in a gyroscope? Death metal kings Cryptopsy clearly have"
JONATHAN SELZER
REVIEWS EDITOR

SKINDRED
Smile
"The summer's feelgood anthems have arrived. Sod the rain – Skindred bring the sunshine!"
VANESSA THORPE
PRODUCTION EDITOR

SKINDRED
Smile
"Ain't no party like a Skindred party!"
LOUISE BROCK
ART EDITOR

SKINDRED
Smile
"Reliably brilliant as ever, Skindred are putting the reggae back in reggae metal"
RICH HOBSON
STAFF WRITER

CODE ORANGE
The Above
"They've finally made the breakthrough album they've been promising"
DAVE EVERLEY
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

PRESS

NEW NOISE

SHEPHERDS REIGN

They've supported Alien Weaponry, and now these New Zealand-based groove metallers are bringing Polynesian culture to the masses

WORDS: FRASER LEWRY

Shepherds Reign (left to right): Gideon Voon, Joseph Oti-George, Filiva'a James, Shaymen Rameka, Oliver Leupolu

THERE AREN'T MANY videos that begin with an apology, but *Ua Masa'a*, the recent single by New Zealand-based Polynesian groove metallers Shepherds Reign, does, and with good reason. It's harrowing. *Ua Masa'a* tells the story of singer Filiva'a James's sister, who was reportedly subjected to abuse and murdered by her spouse. As he sings, Filiva'a puts himself in his sister's place, and faces the man who's about to take her life. There's anguish, and terror, and fury, and it's no less chilling for being sung in Samoan. The emotion is palpable, the anger confronting. And for Filiva'a, the song's first live performance was a cathartic moment.

"It was beautiful," he says, speaking from his home in Mngere, South Auckland. "After I sang my last note, I just looked down and everyone was cheering, with the band still playing away. They finished the outro, and it just felt *heavy*, like the world was about to break down."

Onstage, Shepherds Reign do not look much like other bands. For starters, all the members sport huge sharks' tooth necklaces.

"We call it Ula Nifo," says guitarist Oliver Leupolu. "It's a traditional Samoan necklace, traditionally worn by the children of chiefs."

"Back then it was sperm whale teeth," adds Filiva'a. "So they were *big*. They were such great warriors that they used to kill sperm whales, which is hard to do, you know? They're *huge*!"

Filiva'a also plays log drums onstage, and in a world where indigenous musicians are increasingly willing to highlight their culture in the music they make – think the Māori metal of fellow New Zealanders Alien Weaponry, or the folk metal of Mongolia's The Hu – Shepherds Reign are discovering that fans are becoming more and more willing to embrace the mix.

"It's really cool," says Oliver. "It goes together well, incorporating cultural elements into rock and metal music. We didn't always incorporate traditional elements into our music, but when we first tried it, we definitely felt something. Singing in your language is powerful. And telling stories from your culture is powerful."

"It gives you a sense of pride," adds Filiva'a. "That's your language you're singing, your favourite genre of music in the background. We love metal, and we love Samoa, obviously, because we're Samoan. Boom! It's a match made in Heaven. Or Hell, depending on what you believe!"

The end result is undeniably fierce. Shepherds Reign's sound is thoroughly modern, with clanking riffs and crushing, brutish rhythms. Not necessarily what you'd expect from a band formed by a pair of piano teachers. Filiva'a and Oliver met while tutoring in college, then added drummer Shaymen Rameka – who'd been at school with Oliver – and guitarist Gideon Voon, before having to wait for the right man to become available on bass. The right man was Joseph Oti-George, who was just 16 when the band found him, not even old enough to drink. So the guys waited until he was 18, then asked him to join.

"The reason why we liked him was because he was listening to the same things that we were, which was surprising," says Filiva'a. "Whatever kids are listening to nowadays, it's not the same as what we used to listen to."

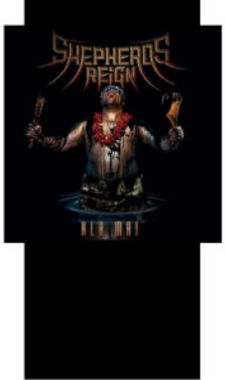
Line-up complete, the band made their first big splash in 2019 with the single *Le Manu*, whose accompanying video – three million views on YouTube and counting – is absolutely electrifying. Part fist-pumping metal

IN SHORT

SOUNDS LIKE: Thrashing riffs and deep grooves, informed by gods, warriors and Pacific ancestors

FOR FANS OF: Alien Weaponry, Gojira, Five Finger Death Punch

LISTEN TO: *Le Manu*



PRESS

anthem with occasional bursts of twin, Iron Maiden-esque guitars, and part history lesson, the song celebrates the great warrior Manu Samoa, who gives his name to the Samoan national rugby team. It also doesn't hurt that, like The Hu, the band understand the importance of an alluring video.

"It's very important. *Very* important," stresses Filiva'a. "People nowadays, they watch stuff on YouTube and they don't even know what it's about. It just catches their attention. I've seen a lot of reaction videos for *Le Manu*, and the first thing they say is, 'Oh, there's a guy here. He's very angry, with a massive afro. And he's in the forest! Wow! Let's watch it.' And that's what grabs them. The better you are, and the better the quality of your videos, the more attention you're gonna get."

Filiva'a's towering afro isn't the only striking thing about the frontman. Aside from that, and the log drums, and the sharks' teeth, he's perhaps unique in modern metal in that his main onstage instrument is the keytar, the much-mocked hybrid instrument made famous by synth pioneers like Jan Hammer and Herbie Hancock.

"IT FELT LIKE THE WORLD WAS ABOUT TO BREAK DOWN"

FILIVA'A JAMES

"I used to play a keyboard," says Filiva'a. "I'd pick it up and hold it above my shoulder, and play it like that, like it was a keytar. It was *heavy*. I love incorporating piano into metal, and I needed a way to do it without using up so much space, and keytars are the way to go. Definitely."

If this makes Shepherds Reign sound like a novelty act, fear not. They're fearless, ferocious, utterly convincing, and in their new album *Ala Mai* they have made something that's as powerful as it is unique. And, like The Hu, Alien Weaponry and Bloodywood, they've become cultural ambassadors along the way.

"We didn't set out to do that," says Oliver. "But the way that our music has travelled the world, we've turned into that. So there's a bit of responsibility, an extra weight on what we do, as we represent our people."

***ALA MAI* IS OUT ON AUGUST 25 VIA GOLDEN ROBOT**

NEW NOISE

CRYPTA

Ex-Nervosa members find new life in grizzly death metal

WORDS: MATT MILLS • PICTURES: ESTEVAM ROMERA

WHEN CRYPTA FORMED in 2019, it was as a death metal side-project for then-Nervosa members Fernanda Lira [vocals/bass] and Luana Dametto [drums]. But within a year the band had taken on a life of its own, the pair simultaneously leaving the thrash group after "growing apart" from the band's founder Prika Amaral after playing together for more than a decade.

"We weren't friends anymore, but we loved the band so much that we didn't know what to do," Fernanda admits. "When we started writing a new Nervosa album, we didn't like what we were writing, and that was the breaking point for me. I can't fake the music I play."

Crypta clearly have no such issues. The band's 2021 debut, *Echoes Of The Soul*, charted in both Germany and the US, and the following summer the quartet played the 85,000-capacity Wacken festival before being invited to open for Morbid Angel and Revocation on a 2023 tour across the United States.

"We were invited onto that Morbid Angel tour by Trey [Azagthoth] personally," Fernanda remembers, still beaming over the fact. "That was extra special! Before the tour, he watched so many videos of us playing live."

New album *Shades Of Sorrow* is their second in two years and offers all of death metal's finest grizzly cuttings. There's tremolo picking and the mandatory roars, but the band also deal in death/doom heaviness and slicing lead guitar lines à la early melodeath.

"Luana has always been a death metal drummer," Fernanda says. "[When Crypta started] I wanted to experiment with my other songwriting abilities. I had been writing thrash for nearly a decade – I'm still challenging myself with every new album."

As for the future, Fernanda knows exactly what she wants it to hold for Crypta.

"I wanna tour with Arch Enemy, Behemoth, Cannibal Corpse and Opeth," she laughs. "And I won't rest until I do!"

IN SHORT

SOUNDS LIKE:
If Obituary worshipped black metal and had Bill Steer on guitar

FOR FANS OF:
Cannibal Corpse, Nervosa, Carcass

LISTEN TO:
Lord Of Ruins

***SHADES OF SORROW* IS OUT NOW VIA NAPALM**

OTTTO

WORDS: STEPHEN HILL

Crossover thrash, melodic hardcore and alt rock collide in electrifying LA band's debut

REMEMBER PEOPLE LOSING their freaking minds during *Stranger Things* when Eddie Munson ripped through *Master Of Puppets*? Of course you do. Well, the guitar part you heard on the show was actually played by one Tye Trujillo, son of Metallica's Robert, and bassist in his own excellent band OTTTO.

"It was wild to be part of such a huge pop culture moment," Tye tells us with a grin. "I was honoured to be asked, but, really, our goal has always just been to get metal out there to as many people as possible."

OTTTO themselves are certainly passionate about all things heavy. They might be sickeningly youthful, but their debut album *Life Is A Game* sounds like a band way beyond their years.

"We're inspired by the classic heavy music of the 80s and 90s," vocalist and guitarist Bryan Noah Ferretti says. "All that great metal and rock that was part of a mainstream invasion still sounds relevant today. That's a goal of ours, to help bring rock back where it belongs."

Life Is A Game could feasibly do its part in that respect, taking classic thrash, crossover hardcore and alt rock hooks and squashing them all together with the enthusiastic zeal of youth, less concerned with fitting into pigeonholes as making the music they love.

"We'd all been in bands before," Tye says. "But there's something in this band that has been really freeing."

IN SHORT

SOUNDS LIKE:
A teenage and excitable Alice In Chains jamming Suicidal Tendencies and Agnostic Front covers

FOR FANS OF:
Suicidal Tendencies, Turnstile, D.R.I.

LISTEN TO:
Skyscraper

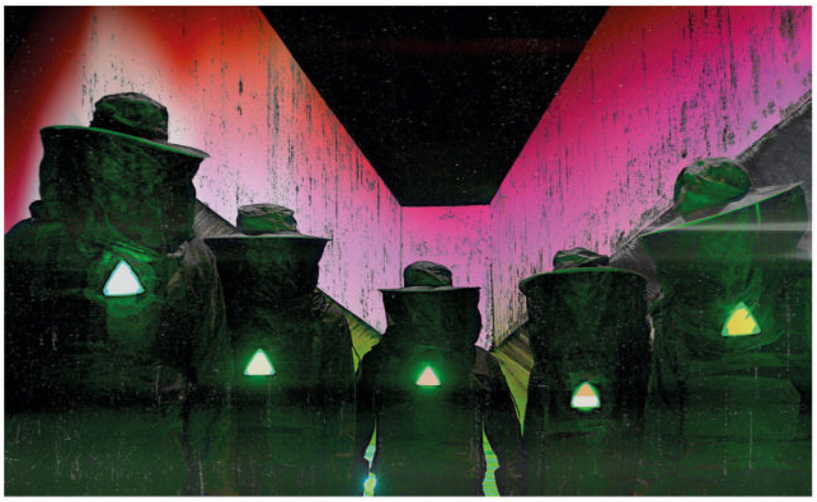
***LIFE IS A GAME* IS OUT NOW VIA ORG**

PRESS

WALLOWING

Extreme metal weirdos explore strange new worlds

WORDS: ALEX DELLER



IN SHORT

SOUNDS LIKE:
A space opera soundtrack scored by fans of prog, grind and doom metal

FOR FANS OF:
Cryptic Shift, Parius, Pig Destroyer

LISTEN TO:
Cyborg Asphyxiation

SCI-FI AND HEAVY metal have always been happy bedfellows, but few acts ensconce themselves so fully in the genre as Brighton's Wallowing. Accompanying their sludged-out prog-grind with comic books, trading cards and a live set featuring futuristic costumes and dry ice, they're less a band than a multisensory experience.

"Our approach isn't just about writing or performing," explains vocalist/synth player Mx. "We're interested in anything we can do to immerse people in this universe. Depicting the story in graphic novels or creating action figures helps make it more real for everyone. Plus, we're all massive nerds and they're all things we're interested in, so it makes perfect sense."

Thankfully, this side of things shows no sign of abating, as bassist R suggests: "We're constantly striving to be bigger, better and more ridiculous," he says. "If the debut was us falling out of our cryostasis pods in a groggy rage, *Earth Reaper* sees us engaging the engines full throttle and blasting into the abyss."

Though guitarist T suggests the band started out as an "overwhelmingly silly solo project," there's no denying how serious things have become. And while their continuing sci-fi saga might seem worlds away from our Earth-tethered existence, there are commonalities. "While sci-fi is great for escapism, it tends to have dual meanings," says T. "These stories allow their protagonists to escape the 'evil tyrannical overlord' – something us Earth dwellers don't currently have the pleasure of doing."

***EARTH REAPER* IS OUT NOW VIA CHURCH ROAD**

ALLFATHER

The Kent quartet using sludgy thrash metal to rightfully bludgeon the far right

WORDS: MATT MILLS • PICTURES: ZOE M AURELIA

IN SHORT

SOUNDS LIKE:
A riff-powered sludge metal attack against gatekeepers and oppressors

FOR FANS OF:
High On Fire, Crowbar, Iron Monkey

LISTEN TO:
Take Their Eyes

SOME BANDS HIDE their politics behind vague lyrics, but not Allfather. On their third album, *A Violent Truth*, these Rochester sludge brutes rage against the far right with riffs and roars.

"We wrote the lyrics pre-pandemic, about Trump, people at the [American] border in cages, the Tory party becoming more and more far right, and the mess that was Brexit," vocalist Tom B. tells *Hammer*. "The song *Take Their Eyes* was inspired by an article that talked about how Trump and the Tories were testing moral boundaries. How comfortable were people with seeing children in cages? Turns out, people were quite comfortable."

Allfather formed a decade ago, after Tom and bassist Andrew Day bonded over metalcore bands like Vision Of Disorder. Their goal, despite the fury of their downtuned music, is to make metal a safer, more tolerant place.

"We want people to understand that heavy metal can be a safe space for people that aren't just white dudes, which might be difficult for us, because we're a bunch of white dudes," Tom laughs. "But our shows are welcoming to all people, all across the board. If you stick our record on, we want you to enjoy the heavy metal!"

***A VIOLENT TRUTH* IS OUT NOW**

IN THE KNOW

What your favourite bands are listening to

CELESTIAL SANCTUARY

"CELESTIAL SANCTUARY ARE great, they're one of my favourite sort of old-school death metal bands. They're from the UK and I haven't got to meet them yet – we've only really spoken through sending packages to each other! I like their record [*Soul Diminished*] a lot and I'm looking forward to the new one they've got coming up."

MAX CAVALERA, SOULFLY, CAVALERA

PRESS

HOARD ALMIGHTY

Box sets, underground oddities and all the essential merch you need this month

CANNIBAL CORPSE

CHAOS HORRIFIC - LIMITED EDITION DELUXE BOX SET

METAL BLADE

£52.99

IN CANNIBAL CORPSE'S unforgiving world, the only creatures likely to have their innards left intact are the stuffed toys frontman George 'Corpsegrinder' Fisher regularly liberates from claw machines. Each of their 15 albums thus far have been celebrations of the wide-ranging art of organ removal, extreme, terminal body modification and the alternative use of household tools. Now celebrating 35 years, the Floridian death metal institution are about to unleash the latest Grand Guignol of gore, *Chaos Horrific*, extending their technical mastery into parts other bands, thankfully, can't reach. Raise a fist – your own, attached, ideally – because it's coming with a gloriously gory box set version, including the album on CD and haemorrhage-red vinyl, a 34-page, 12-inch book featuring the lyrics and more, plus a poster, print and even a jigsaw all featuring Vince Locke's typically visceral artwork. Bloody brilliant.

tinyurl.com/boxset-horrific

SOUNDGARDEN POP! FIGURINES

£83.99

Badmotorfinger is the album that put Soundgarden on the brink of mainstream success. Now you can worship at its altar as Chris Cornell and co get housed in a huge, ~~rusty cage~~ super-collectible box set.

tinyurl.com/finger-pop

METALLICA WHISKEY

£119.90

Each batch of this delicious craft liquor has been subjected to a low-frequency blast of Metallica's music. Sounds positively deadly, and more than likely to *'Throw all you see into obscurity'* as it tantalises your tastebuds.

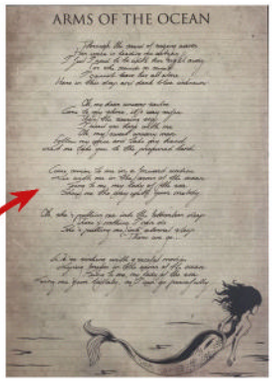
tinyurl.com/in-the-jar

KATAKLYSM T-SHIRT

£19

Does anything sum up the heavy metal spirit quite like diminutive David knocking the brains out of Goliath with a pebble flung from an old sock? Melodeath mavens Kataklysm clearly think the analogy is a fine one.

tinyurl.com/goliath-tee



BLACKBRIAR LYRICS

£26-£56

Blackbriar's soaring goth-metal is deservedly making some major waves. If you're one of those won over by their symphonic majesty, then how about this: handwritten lyrics, personally penned by singer Zora?

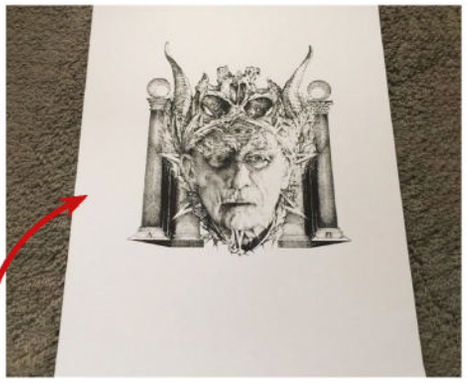
tinyurl.com/blackbriar-lyrics

SHEPHERDS REIGN T-SHIRT

£26

Their name might speak to a quiet life spent trundling over hills and minding one's flock, but these Polynesians sure know how to make a racket. Featuring an axe *and* a skull, this shirt ticks two of our main sartorial boxes.

tinyurl.com/shepherds-tee



ALEISTER CROWLEY LITHOGRAPH

£65

Limited to 33 copies, this piece commemorating the Wickedest Man In The World comes from the studio of Necros Christos and The Devil's Blood artist Manuel Tinnemans. Buy it! Or don't. Do what thou wilt and all that.

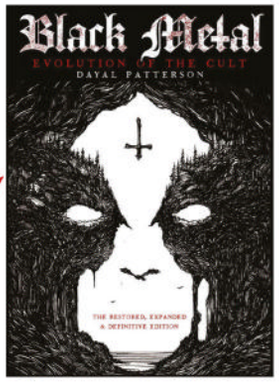
tinyurl.com/crowley-print

BLOOD MERIDIAN T-SHIRT

£19.90

Much like the best heavy metal, *Blood Meridian* is brutal, beautiful and bleak as all feck. Declare your admiration for its late author Cormac McCarthy with a minimalist tee only fellow book geeks will appreciate.

tinyurl.com/they-rode-on



BLACK METAL: EVOLUTION OF THE CULT

£35/£95

Thought Dayal Patterson's original tome was the definitive word on black metal? WRONG. This expanded edition adds 120,000 words and 60 interviews, digging deeper into the genre's boneyards and moonlit places of worship.

tinyurl.com/cult-expanded

ORBIT CULTURE T-SHIRT

£21.70

Getting into the groove with Orbit Culture's monstrous fifth album? Yeah, us too – couldn't you tell by our curious gyrations? Show the band some love with this austere 'if you know, you know' design.

tinyurl.com/orbit-tee

LUCIFER COVEN COIN

£6

Pay for the scurrilous goods, services and souls you procure with this Satanic token. Alternatively, cling to it with your cold, dead hands; Charon will appreciate it as he ferries you across the River Styx.

tinyurl.com/lucifer-coin

NIGHTWISH ON TRACK

£15.99

Symphonic metal powerhouse Nightwish have led a long and storied life, spanning nine studio albums and 25+ years. Here Simon McMurdo dives into the band's back catalogue, analysing every track from *Elvenpath* to *Ad Astra*.

tinyurl.com/nightwish-book

DORO BOX SET

£69

Titling an album *Conqueress - Forever Strong And Proud* rather sums up the Metal Queen's staggering 40-year career, don't you think? This grand box set contains splattery vinyl, two CDs, and a pendant, pick and patch. Hail!

tinyurl.com/doro-box

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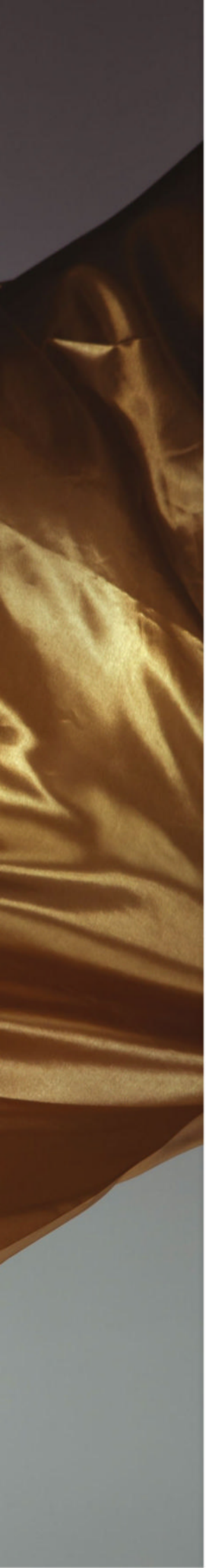
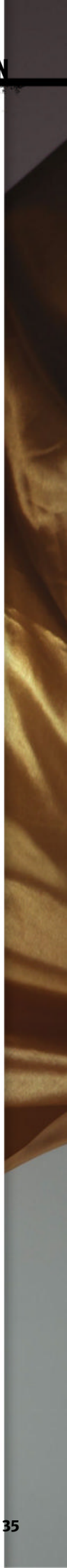


STAND UP AND SHOUT

It would be easy for Within Temptation to coast on their reputation as symphonic metal veterans. Instead, new album *Bleed Out* is a daring rallying cry for freedom

WORDS: DANNII LEIVERS • PICTURES: TIM TRONCKOE



In September 2008, Within Temptation visited Kherson, a port city in the south of Ukraine, just north of the Crimean Peninsula.

The Dutch metallers were nearing the end of a year-and-half-long tour for their fourth album, *The Heart Of Everything*, and it was their first time in the Eastern European country. Two days later, they would play a show in the capital, Kyiv, but it's Kherson that sticks out most vividly in their minds: a former Eastern bloc city on the rise, the beautiful tree-lined streets, the wide Dnieper River. During their stay, they were treated to a ceremonial tour with the mayor and invited, poignantly in hindsight, to plant a tree for peace.

"They put us in national clothing and gave us traditional food," vocalist Sharon Den Adel says, remembering the warm welcome. "We had an amazing few days."

When Russian president Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Kherson was the first major Ukrainian city to fall. Russian troops occupied the city from March to November, before it was recaptured by Ukrainian forces.

"The resistance there was really strong," says Robert Westerholt, Sharon's husband and Within Temptation co-founder/studio guitarist. "Every night, they would come out and literally slit throats of Russian soldiers, [come] out of corners and attack them in every way they could. They were really paranoid, the Russians, they never felt at ease there."

That staunch defiance inspired the band to write *Cyanide Love*, one of several songs on the band's new album, *Bleed Out*, about the Ukraine War. *'Sunflowers will soon be growing over your grave,'* sings Sharon over tense synths and downtuned guitars, a reference to a viral video on the first day of the invasion: a Ukrainian woman offers sunflower seeds to a Russian soldier with the harrowing wish that they bloom in his pocket after his death. *'You'll take it, you'll face it / The barrel of my smoking gun.'*

"We really hope to go back [to Kherson] one day," says Robert, and his voice aches with sadness.

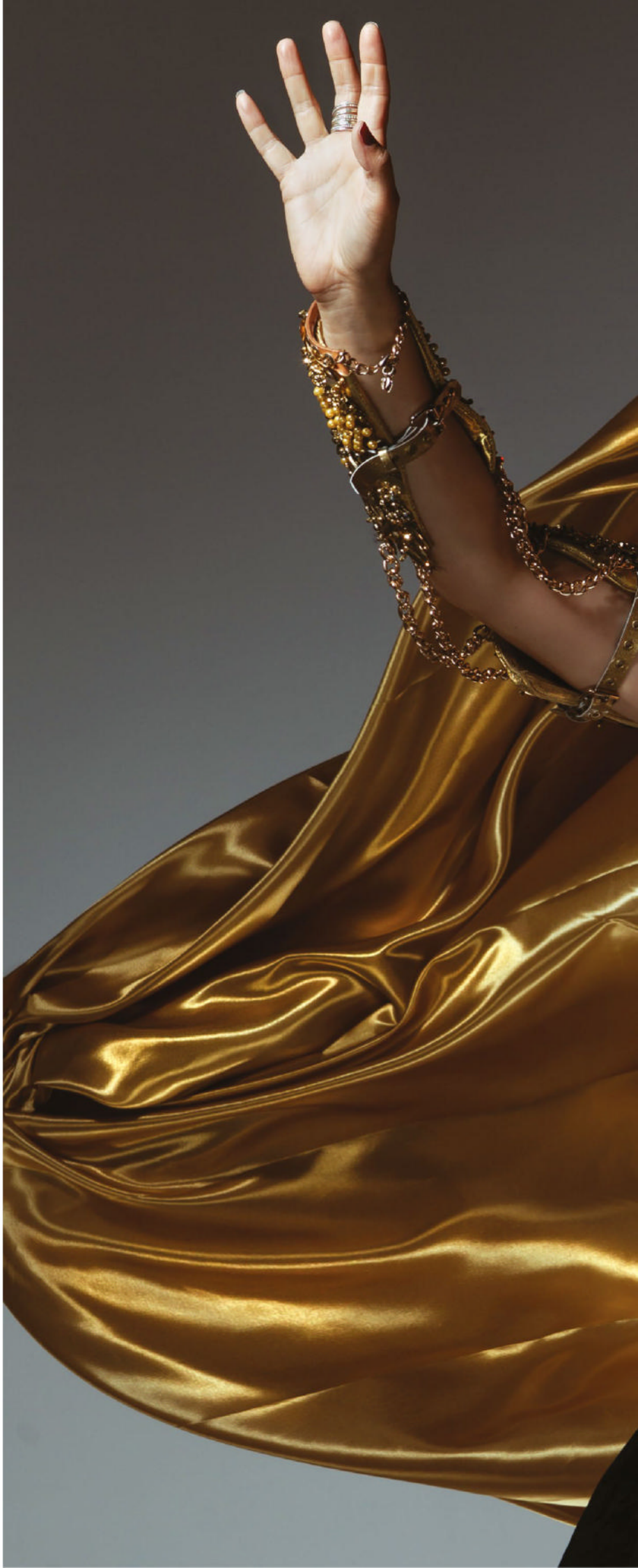
We're sitting in the stylish but homely kitchen – all high ceilings and tall windows – of Sharon and Robert's house in a pretty, peaceful countryside town, 40 minutes from the manic tourist bustle of Amsterdam. The couple have lived here for 15 years, and it's very much their haven. As we talk, their two sons are next door playing a videogame on the TV. Their friendly black labrador, Charlie, demands a head stroke, and gold balloons strung across the front door celebrate their daughter Eva's recent high school graduation.

But it's also Within Temptation HQ, the base where they've masterminded the band's shift from ethereal, dark-edged symphonic royalty to a powerhouse of modern heavy metal (see: 2019's *Resist*).

We've been invited here for a world-exclusive playback of *Bleed Out*, the band's eighth album, which, at the time of our visit, hasn't even been officially announced. As Robert

"EVERY NIGHT THEY WOULD SLIT THROATS OF RUSSIAN SOLDIERS"

ROBERT WESTERHOLT



Sharon is very pro-liberty

leads us through the house, we pass a rail in the hall that holds several leather jackets, and an enormous canvas bearing the artwork of *The Heart Of Everything*. Inside the white-walled studio, art and guitars hang on one wall above a low sofa.

Sharon and Robert seem relaxed and excited to talk about the new album, although even now they're still making last-minute changes. Up until yesterday, the album had a different title; on the few tracks we were sent in advance, it was *The Ultimate Sacrifice*. The new name, Sharon says, is stronger, and more representative of the real-life struggles that have inspired some of the songs.

She was in Sweden when she heard about the invasion of Ukraine. Her immediate response, like many others, was one of shock and fear, admitting that the old-fashioned method of warfare – troops and tanks on the ground – was not something she had expected to see in her lifetime.

"Maybe that's naïve, but not in Europe," she says, curled up barefoot on a nearby armchair. "Kyiv is only a two-and-a-half-hour flight by plane [from the Netherlands]. It's the same distance as Spain, where I'm going in a few days."

Before they press play, they show us the artwork, which depicts a hooded figure in shades of black and red.

"It's dark," Sharon notes, "because the album is dark."

"THE YOUNGER GENERATION ARE READY FOR CHANGE"

SHARON DEN ADEL

While Within Temptation's last record, *Resist*, blew their sound up to supercharged proportions, just one listen of *Bleed Out* is enough to confirm that this is Within Temptation's biggest, heaviest record so far. Stepping things up a level was necessary to match the severity of the source material. Opener *Go To War* sets the tone with a colossal guitar part and an apocalyptic choir, a chorus dripping in grandeur, and a marriage of synths with the unmistakable mechanical judder of tech metal.

The latter influence, Robert says, has filtered into the band's sound not through bingeing on Meshuggah albums, but because its cold, almost cruel, mechanical nature best helped to paint a picture of a universe in crisis. "Somehow this [sound] resonates with that."

The title track follows in the same vein, anthemic and cinematic, with hints of the epic symphonic and gothic doom of their earlier material. It all sounds huge – built to fill the massive rooms the band have become accustomed to playing these days.

"Certain elements have come back in, that made us in the beginning," says Robert. "They still inspire us."

When we suggest it's a culmination of every step in the band's sonic evolution, Sharon agrees: "But with an extra layer of heaviness."

"We have been searching for this for quite some time, to have a sound that is heavy, but still has this melancholy

Within Temptation have gone dark for *Bleed Out*

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and beautiful storytelling lines," she continues. "And finally, it happened on the very last few songs [we wrote]. Sometimes you have just one song that opens the door."

It would be easy to draw parallels between Within Temptation's current approach and a band like Sabaton, who have made a career out of songs that go big on bombast and heroism. Robert is quick to shut the comparison down.

"We're not making war songs. We're not doing history lessons," he says, arguing that the band didn't find inspiration in the grim reality of the battlefield. "It's more the drive of people and their personal stories. We won't be going onstage with a tank."

Within Temptation are reluctant to call this a "political" album, but there's no doubt it's their most socially aware yet, far removed from the fantastical tendencies of old. For our listening session we've been joined by the band's manager, Martijn, perhaps a sign that, while Sharon and Robert are keen to discuss the inspirations behind the album, they're cautious about the sensitivities involved. *Go To War, Cyanide Love, Worth Dying For* and *Wireless* directly reference the invasion. The latter talks about the danger of propaganda.

"I remember that I was in Russia once and saw something on my own social media," says Sharon. "I asked someone sitting next to me, 'What are they saying?' And the guy said, 'Yes, these Americans, blah, blah… completely the opposite of what I've been reading on social media where I'm living. If you don't go deeper, if you don't search for more information that tells you the story from different perspectives, then you will believe the state television. So that's why it's important to tell stories, to give counterweight."

The band almost called the track *Mark Of Cain*, a reference to Cain murdering his brother Abel in the Book Of Genesis.

"Russia sees their neighbour country as… something that belongs to them or like family," continues Sharon. "It's like you wear the Mark Of Cain, everybody knows you killed your brother."

> **"I CAN TALK ABOUT BUBBLEGUM, BUT ALSO THINGS THAT MATTER"**
>
> SHARON DEN ADEL

Meanwhile, Sharon says the title track was written about Iranian woman Mahsa Amini, who was arrested for allegedly breaking hijab rules and died in the custody of the country's morality police. Her death sparked nationwide protests.

"It's inspirational that some people are willing [to protest], knowing when they take off their scarf, what's going to happen to them," she says. She viewed the protests as a generational conflict: "There's a lot of women taking a lot of risk to do that, but also men from their own generation supporting them and also getting into trouble… the older generation are trying to keep things how they are, and the younger generation are ready [for] change."

We haven't heard Within Temptation this fired up in ages, but their initial intention wasn't to make an album. They had spent the last two years releasing singles – *Entertain You* and *The Purge* in 2020 and *Shed My Skin* in 2021, all of which appear on the record – and enjoying the off-cycle immediacy of being able to write, record and upload. Following the outbreak of war, though, writing between their home and the Swedish studio of long-time collaborator Daniel Gibson, the remaining material came together over six months.

Other topics are discussed on the record, too: *Ritual* is a tongue-in-cheek, double-entendre-heavy paean to female sexual expression. *Shed My Skin* is about living by your own rules, free from the judgement of others, while Sharon describes *Entertain You* as "a song for the misfits". It was inspired, she says, by a video she saw on social media.

"There was a trans woman who was walking in England, and she was bullied by three young guys. She's not there for their entertainment, but they're using her for entertainment because she's different. I wrote that song [to say] we're beautiful in our own way. To share some love."

While some of the tracks were written and recorded almost three years apart, what holds the album together is the theme of freedom.

"To protect your freedom, you have to be active," says Robert. "If you're passive, then you're going to lose it. It's

TEMPTING FATE

The songs that chart Within Temptation's evolution from symphonic pioneers to arena-filling stars

MOTHER EARTH
(MOTHER EARTH, 2000)
Evoking a fairy tale world of crystal lakes and enchanted forests, *Mother Earth* embraced symphonic metal, albeit with a folkier, less bombastic edge. This is Within Temptation at their purest and prettiest.

STAND MY GROUND
(THE SILENT FORCE, 2004)
On *Stand My Ground*, the band perfected a blend of anthemia and dark-edged splendour that has defined their music ever since. Almost two decades on, it is still one of their most enduring anthems.

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE
(THE HEART OF EVERYTHING, 2007)
Turning every dial in Within Temptation's arsenal up to 100, with melodramatic vocals, hulking guitars and an absolute belter of a chorus, this is the band at their most electrifyingly overblown.

OUR SOLEMN HOUR
(THE HEART OF EVERYTHING, 2007)
A Winston Churchill speech, a choir singing in Latin and a sense of imminent apocalypse – 16 years after its release, *Our Solemn Hour* still sounds as urgent and relevant as ever.

FASTER
(THE UNFORGIVING, 2011)
Boasting one of their most irresistible choruses, *Faster* dialled down the band's symphonic inclinations for razor-sharp pop metal. The first step in the band's transition from symphonic royalty to arena mainstays.

PARADISE
(WHAT ABOUT US?)
(HYDRA, 2014)
However incohesive *Hydra* was as an album, it gifted us this thunderous, unforgettable duet with ex-Nightwish singer Tarja Turunen, and for that, we are eternally grateful.

THE RECKONING
(RESIST, 2019)
With a little help from Papa Roach's Jacoby Shaddix and a buzzing electronic backbone that added a whole new dimension to the band's sound, with *The Reckoning*, they entered a gigantic new era.

SUPERNOVA
(RESIST, 2019)
Written following the death of Sharon's father in 2018, *Supernova* is a powerhouse of a track. As she sings, *'These days when I'm lost, I search the skies'* over glittering synths and colossal guitars, it perfectly captures the enormity of grief.

THE PURGE
(BLEED OUT, 2023)
Face it: no one makes fists-in-the-air anthems better than Within Temptation. *The Purge*, a cathartic command to eradicate any toxic presences in your life, simply begs to be screamed at the top of your lungs.

WIRELESS
(BLEED OUT, 2023)
Not only is *Wireless* the band's heaviest and most overtly political song yet, it brings every one of their sonic eras together as a perfect culmination of past and present.

Within Temptation (left to right): Jeroen van Veen, Stefan Helleblad, Sharon den Adel, Mike Coolen, Ruud Jolie, Martijn Spierenburg

Live venues are only going to get bigger for Within Temptation

about personal freedom, but also freedom for your country, for your friends, family… everything."

"It's a record about the unbreakable desire of humans to live free from tyranny and oppression," agrees Sharon. "How many also are willing to give so much to achieve this not only for themselves, but for others and future generations. As an artist you have this platform, and we can talk about bubblegum. But I can also talk about things that matter."

Having listened to the album in full, we decamp to a nearby brasserie for lunch, and to continue the conversation. Sharon drives, and as we cruise through the cool shade of the forest next to their home, she motions towards a large sand dune that meets the trees – a bizarre natural phenomenon where the cover art for her 2018 solo album, *My Indigo*, was shot. She'd like to record more solo work, she later tells us.

"One day, but not at the moment, because I need a little time. It's been a rollercoaster. I have been writing songs since the war started, before that we had the pandemic, and after that we had to do all the shows that we couldn't do during Corona."

"TO PROTECT YOUR FREEDOM, YOU HAVE TO BE ACTIVE"

ROBERT WESTERHOLT

Once at the restaurant, we are shown to a table in a private corner outside, tucked away beside the hedges, where Robert and Sharon order us food and drinks. Clearly well-known, several members of staff come over to greet them during the rest of our interview. Our conversation takes us all over: to Taylor Swift, an artist Sharon respects, and whether they would ever do Eurovision given the rise in metal acts (the answer is no, although Sharon was once on the Dutch judging panel). We soon get back to the album – whenever an artist wades into the kind of matters discussed on *Bleed Out*, someone always complains that politics should be kept out of music. Have they received any backlash?

"I deleted a message yesterday on Facebook," says Sharon, explaining that a fan/troll had taken umbrage with the band's song *Raise Your Banner*, from 2019's *Resist*, which Sharon has taken to dedicating to Ukraine at their live shows, often waving a flag onstage.

"He said, 'You're preaching about freedom and then you preach war. You slut.'"

She pauses to let the language sink in. He had complained about the lyric, *'Blood for freedom.'*

"It means you would give your life to have freedom," she argues. "So, if he had put five minutes of effort into

KATJA OGRIN

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reading the lyrics, then he would know *Raise Your Banner* is taking a stand."

"What annoys me a lot is that people say, 'Don't talk about politics'," adds Robert. "It's not even politics. It's your opinion as an artist. Artists have opinions. That's what art is for. That's what makes it interesting."

In 2021, Sharon was invited by *Kerrang!* to write a comment piece for International Women's Day, and chose to argue the importance of access to abortion. Her research for the piece revealed vastly differing approaches across Europe.

"There were people who didn't understand my point of view," she says of the response to the essay, as lunch arrives at the table. "Not everybody is in the same place at the same time when you write an article like that. But backlash is also a good thing, because then it gets the attention that it needs."

The track *Don't Pray For Me* from the new album makes the argument for bodily autonomy: *'I don't need your absolution, so don't hold that sword over me / For my confessions I don't need a church / I don't need salt to know where it hurts.'*

"We were fighting for that and talking about it [when I was in my teens], and we're still fighting the same battles," she says, explaining that the issues facing women are increasingly at the forefront of her mind, especially given her own daughter's coming of age. "It doesn't seem like we have stepped forward yet."

"WE DON'T FEEL LIKE A SYMPHONIC BAND"

ROBERT WESTERHOLT

Within Temptation have always been equally fascinated and horrified by the human predisposition for destruction and harm, whether it be towards our planet or fellow man. As far back as 2004's *The Silent Force*, the haunting *Forsaken* painted a desperate picture of the end of days. *'Our time has run out, our future has died / There's no more escape... We're the last of our kind.'* They also grappled with the futility of war in 2007, on *Our Solemn Hour*, from *The Heart Of Everything*, which interspersed symphonic excess with excerpts from Winston Churchill's Be Ye Men Of Valour speech.

In 2020, they had started planning a stage production worthy of their grandiose vision, although the pandemic put their plans on ice. Instead, their blueprints became The Aftermath, a CGI livestream in 2021 which took place in a post-apocalyptic world. It depicted the band performing in the remnants of a ruined landscape, escaping to space as the planet burns in a fireball below – a sobering statement on the man-made challenges facing us today.

"It was a thought experiment of what would be very possible in the future," says Robert of his sci-fi vision. "There were two thoughts behind it. One, we are getting more aware that we're really destroying our planet and ourselves. That's pretty obvious right now. But the second thing is the big perspective – it's quite logical that people, at a certain point, will definitely [abandon Earth and] go into space."

Another subject the band are interested in is the increasing, perhaps dangerous, control modern technology has on our lives. They're huge fans of Charlie Brooker's Netflix series *Black Mirror*, while a similar narrative rippled through 2019's *Resist*. Their live shows have become increasingly futuristic in theme, while the video for recent single *Wireless* was made using AI. We mention that *Black Mirror* actor Aaron Paul voiced concerns about AI, and that soon we might not be able to tell what's real and what's not.

"I think that's already the case," says Sharon.

We ask about the rise in AI-created music online, and if they worry about the artistic implications. Robert is dismissive.

"Music is not just about listening to something, it's the whole story around it, where you are at a certain place," he says. "We're very interested in what it can do. It's one big experiment."

How would you feel if someone used AI to make a Within Temptation song, and people thought it was an official track?

"What I could find difficult is they could make lyrics, that are offensive, that I didn't write, and people might think I did," says Sharon.

Robert shrugs. "But then you can tell them you didn't."

"But if they can't tell the difference..." Sharon perseveres.

Robert is still unconcerned. "If it's not on your official website... it's really no issue at all."

Sharon looks at us with a wry smile. "So even we have our discussions about that."

When Within Temptation were able to resume touring after the pandemic, they brought The Aftermath to life. Rescheduling their long-postponed Worlds Collide UK arena tour with Evanescence, suddenly they were operating, conceptually and visually, on a whole new level. Their pyro-packed stage production even included a huge humanoid head. They cite Iron Maiden, who they have toured with several times over the years – the most recent outing being on 2022's Legacy Of The Beast run – as their main inspiration.

"Those bands who do something special visually have always inspired us to do the same," says Sharon.

And while they've been a bone fide arena band in mainland Europe for years, it felt like, finally, they'd cemented the same status in the UK.

"I think everywhere the venues will now be a bit bigger," smiles Robert. "We felt it was a milestone in our career. We didn't care too much about what we were making [financially] with the show, but just to make it the most memorable show that we could. We never thought that we would reach this far."

Sonically, too, it feels like Within Temptation could go anywhere. While *Bleed Out* is littered with symphonic elements, it's a musical label that now feels uncomfortable, something they've long outgrown.

"We don't feel like a symphonic band," says Robert.

Sharon agrees. "But I don't know what to call ourselves now either. I don't have a new box to put ourselves in."

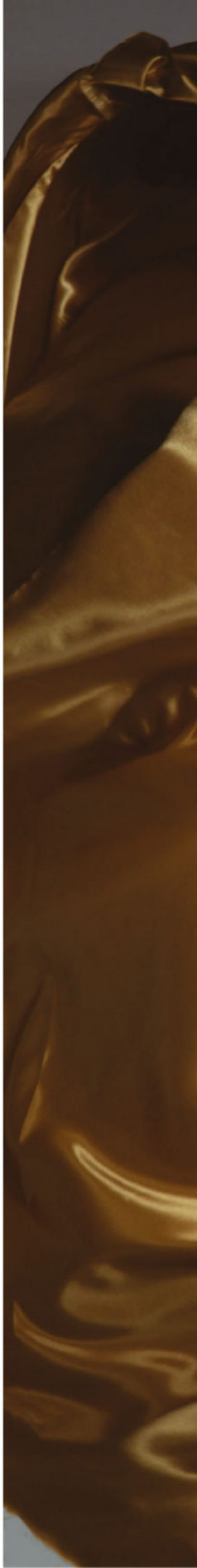
And even as they're making the final changes to *Bleed Out*, their minds are fixed on the future. As hectic as the last year has been, the process of making the new album has got their creative juices flowing.

"It's so funny. As soon as we finished [*Bleed Out*] we were like, 'We want to make another album.' But we're going to take our time for the next one," she insists. "We were working full force from our house [during the pandemic]. I loved what I was doing, but at the same time I was also very tired. So I can't wait to have a little bit of a break. This summer, we have a few festivals and then I have some time to really get both feet on the ground."

She won't take her foot off the gas for too long, though. After 27 years of constant innovation, Within Temptation don't know how to stand still.

"What I feel like now is actually writing again," she laughs, shaking her head. "It's very strange and positive!"

***BLEED OUT* IS RELEASED ON OCTOBER 20 VIA FORCE MUSIC RECORDINGS**



Maybe not symphonic metal anymore, but still definitely metal, and that's the important thing

A Gothic Romance

Inspiring Heartagram tattoos and celebrity adoration, *Love Metal* was the masterpiece that took Him from Finnish unknowns to the buzz band on everyone's lips

WORDS: PAUL BRANNIGAN

PRESS

"People can't help but stare when Ville Valo walks past. They don't know who Ville Valo is, but they know he must be someone, for he oozes the sort of insouciant cool that only the staggeringly confident and achingly hip can pull off. To walk alongside Ville through the hateful tourist trap that is London's Leicester Square on a chilly spring evening is to know how it must feel to be invisible, for passers-by are blinkered and focused as their puzzled eyes lock on the Finn's chiselled features, searching for clues as to his identity. They'll search in vain, for in this country Ville Valo is a nobody, albeit a decidedly handsome nobody."

With these words, in 2003, readers of the world's largest weekly rock magazine were introduced to the frontman of fast-rising gothic rock band Him. The date was February 25, and walking alongside Him's lighting engineer, and this writer, Ville was bound for the UK premiere of *Jackass: The Movie* at Leicester Square Odeon, at the invitation of cast member and pro skateboarder Bam Margera, one of the then-26-year-old vocalist's best friends, and, at the time, Him's most vocal, evangelical and high-profile fan.

Perhaps predictably, aided by models in nurse's uniforms serving up limitless free shots in plastic 'syringes' at the post-screening party, the night would get loose very quickly. At which point, with the release of his band's fourth album, *Love Metal*, imminent, a more calculating, opportunistic musician might have sought to capitalise on the night's networking possibilities, and worked the room to ingratiate himself with the capital's media 'faces' and celebrity guests: instead, an unfazed, unconcerned and happily pissed Ville dragged a sofa into the men's bathroom to hang out with his friends, politely declaring the club's music "too noisy" to allow for proper conversation and meaningful connection.

"I remember that party, and I also remember the hangover that followed," says Ville with a laugh, speaking to *Hammer* today from his studio in Helsinki. "We were staying at the Metropolitan [arguably London's most 'fashionable' hotel at the time] and I woke up the next day, and walked out of the hotel to get some air, all bleary-eyed, and was met with this blinding explosion of paparazzi camera flashes. It turned out that [actress/pop star] Jennifer Lopez was staying there too, and so instead of capturing her looking beautiful, they caught our five seconds of shame! A surreal moment. And that kinda set the tone for the year that followed, because things got kinda wild and weird with *Love Metal*."

"WE DROVE AROUND LA BLASTING OUT SYSTEM OF A DOWN"

VILLE VALO

That at the outset of our conversation today Ville apologises profusely for being all of 10 minutes late, a knock-on effect of a food delivery driver struggling to locate his studio when dropping off a chilli vegan curry dinner-for-one, is a measure of the man's class. So too is the fact that he's one of those vanishingly rare rock stars who'll enquire as to recent developments in his interviewer's life before fielding the same sort of questions himself. And though Him are in the past and he's occupied with his much-acclaimed 'comeback' project VV, he's a most gracious and generous host when asked to take a trip down memory lane to revisit the "rollercoaster ride" that *Love Metal* initiated for Him.

"It's really nice, you know, to still be remembered by a few," he says, in a typically self-deprecating manner, "and there also seems to be interest from quite a few young individuals, who, I guess, find the early 00s sort of cool in a vintage manner."

Obviously, the Him story didn't start with *Love Metal*… but as far as the UK was concerned, it kinda did. While the band (completed by guitarist Mikko 'Linde' Lindström, bassist Mikko 'Mige' Paananen, keyboardist Janne 'Burton' Puurtinen and drummer Mika 'Gas Lipstick' Karppinen) were already a big noise in their homeland, and in Germany since the dawn of the millennium – with *Join Me In Death*, the lead-off single from their second album, 2000's *Razorblade Romance*, topping the singles chart in both 'territories' – Britain, for the most part, remained aloof.

When Him undertook their first full UK tour in May 2002, promoting the previous year's *Deep Shadows And Brilliant Highlights* album, they were playing to, Ville estimates, "20 people or less" each night. "And we loved it," he stresses. "We loved every second of it. We'd go to Germany to make money in order to be able to spend it all on playing empty pubs in Britain, and it was well worth the experience."

More upsetting, though, was the knowledge that they hadn't done themselves justice on their third album. While Ville explains the often-repeated suggestion that Him were close to disbanding after *Deep Shadows And Brilliant Highlights* has been overplayed – "Are you even a proper rock'n'roll band if everyone doesn't quit the band a few times a year?" he asks with a laugh – he says that the album suffered from having "too many chefs in the kitchen," and notes that the band paid too much attention to directives from their record label.

"So then you find yourself touring an album that you're not super-proud of and it makes you angry and depressed," he says simply. "And then you have to prove to yourself and to everyone else that you still have something special about you."

Ville might have felt less confident about the future had the band not already been working on a hard-hitting, Stooges-inspired new song in soundchecks – working title, *Buried Alive By Love* – which he considered "a melodic middle

Him (left to right): Burton, Gas Lipstick (standing), Mige, Linde, Ville

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finger to people who wrote us off". While his bandmates went away on holidays, Ville shut himself away in his new Helsinki apartment – black bin bags covering the windows to discourage local teenagers snapping photographs of the homegrown rock star in their midst – and began writing new songs on an old 'orchestral' guitar from the 1940s.

"My place was a mess, and I was smoking 100 cigarettes a day, but I was really focused on the music, this thing that I love. I was flying high," he remembers.

When his returning bandmates heard his new works-in-progress, their collective spirits soared anew.

"The mood was great, it was the five musketeers again, us against the world," Ville recalls. "The camaraderie was back, we were a real band of brothers, and everybody really had each other's backs. And that, of course, affects the songwriting as well, because when you're strumming your acoustic guitar back home, you can't wait to show off these new songs to the lads you really care about. And that excitement carried over into the studio. The vibe there was chaotic, but a good kind of chaotic."

"I FELT THIS HAIRY TONGUE ON MY FACE. IT WAS DAVE GROHL"

VILLE VALO

Reunited with producer Kai 'Hiili' Hiilesmaa – "a mad scientist, sort of the Lee Scratch Perry of stoner rock, the kind of guy who'll get you to record naked, or wearing crazy masks" – who had worked on debut album *Greatest Lovesongs Vol. 666*, the quintet spent September and October 2002 in Finnvox Studios in Helsinki. Then they relocated to Los Angeles to mix with English studio maestro Tim Palmer (U2, Pearl Jam) at Scream Studios, the facility where Andy Wallace mixed Nirvana's *Nevermind* album.

"It was such a great time," Ville says, beaming at the memories. "We were staying at the Riot House [the Hyatt hotel on Sunset Boulevard] where Led Zeppelin stayed, and we had hired convertible cars and drove around LA with KROQ blasting out System Of A Down's *Aerials*, and it just felt like everything had fallen into place, like we'd achieved everything we hoped to do. We genuinely couldn't wait for everyone to hear what we'd done."

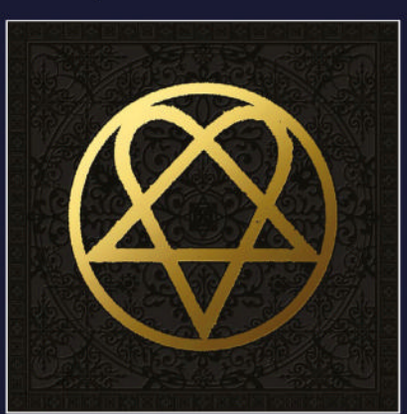
Darkly romantic, atmospheric and hard-hitting, *Love Metal* was released on April 11, 2003, with Him's now-iconic 'Heartagram' logo as the sole cover image – a signifier that this was, at this point, the definitive Him recording. Though it charted at No.1 in Finland and Germany, it peaked at No.55 in the UK, a result that could have proved deflating had the band, their management and label BMG not already discussed a patient, slow-burn marketing strategy to win over UK fans.

Previewing the album, a video for its second track, *The Funeral Of Hearts*, was aired constantly on rock channels Scuzz and Kerrang! TV, and when a multi-formatted physical release for *Buried Alive By Love* followed in May, accompanied by a Bam Margera-directed video starring actress Juliette Lewis, it charted at No.30 in the UK. That same month, sandwiched between Soil and Reef, Him played the Scuzz Stage at the inaugural Download fest, and sold out London's 2,000-capacity Astoria.

Him had momentum, and with hardcore fans such as Killswitch Engage's Howard Jones and Bleeding Through's Brandan Schieppati and Marta Peterson sporting Heartagram tattoos, the Finns started to feel like metal's coolest cult band, with their charismatic, charming and undeniably handsome frontman becoming metal's new poster boy. Crucially, as he'd already been accorded 'rock star' status elsewhere since *Razorblade Romance*, Ville didn't get distracted by his newfound fame, and stayed grounded, emerging as a figure-head for a resurgent, ever-swelling metal/emo/punk scene.

"I think I got my diva pretentiousness out of the way pretty early with *Razorblade Romance*, and had returned to

"I rowed a boat in the Arctic



Forming in '91 and releasing their debut in '97, Him developed as a contingent of the Norwegian black metal scene set fire to its country's churches, inadvertently inspiring the name of the band's fourth album.

"When we started, metal was getting a bad press with the church burnings in Norway, but I loved metal, so calling what we did 'Love Metal' was sort of a middle finger to everyone who might take offence at our band," Ville explains. "We wanted to make metal that was melancholy and melodic and maybe even romantic, and this album was where we nailed that, so it sounded obvious to me to call it *Love Metal*, just like Venom were obviously going to call their album *Black Metal*." This is Ville's guide to *Love Metal*'s songs.

BURIED ALIVE BY LOVE
"The video for this song, which Bam [Margera] shot, introduced us to America. It was a song written in soundchecks, and I think it was quite different to what people expected from Him at that time. It showed that we weren't all about forlorn, melodramatic, mid-tempo ballads! Ha ha ha!"

THE FUNERAL OF HEARTS
"My immediate association thinking about this song is the video again, which was shot by a Finnish designer called Stefan Lindfors, who wasn't really a video director per se. We filmed it in Lapland, and I got to row a boat in the Arctic Sea at six in the morning, which was such a cool experience. Literally a cool experience, as it was -40°C!"

BEYOND REDEMPTION
"I don't think we ever played this song live, and I haven't even heard the title mentioned in about 15 years! It's a pretty straightforward song but Hiili [*Love Metal*'s producer] got us to put some weird 50s tube-based proto-synthesiser sounds in the background to make it a bit more unruly. We always encouraged him to go crazier and crazier with his ideas."

SWEET PANDEMONIUM
"*Sweet Pandemonium* is probably my favourite song on the album. I always like the moody ones. I'd bought some 1940s

Earth long before the success of *Love Metal* kicked in," he muses. "Sure, we were a bunch of rock'n'roll morons, we could be really full of ourselves, but that comes with the job, that's not a negative. Now we were just going with the flow, just trying to hold on tight as the momentum kicked in. It never got super-crazy in terms of ego or indulgences. Later, in the *Dark Light* era [2005-2007], I may have got a bit sucked into a deep hole of my own making: I'd read enough rock biographies to know that was coming, and I had to test it out for myself. But with *Love Metal* we were really on it, and just enjoying each new mad experience we faced."

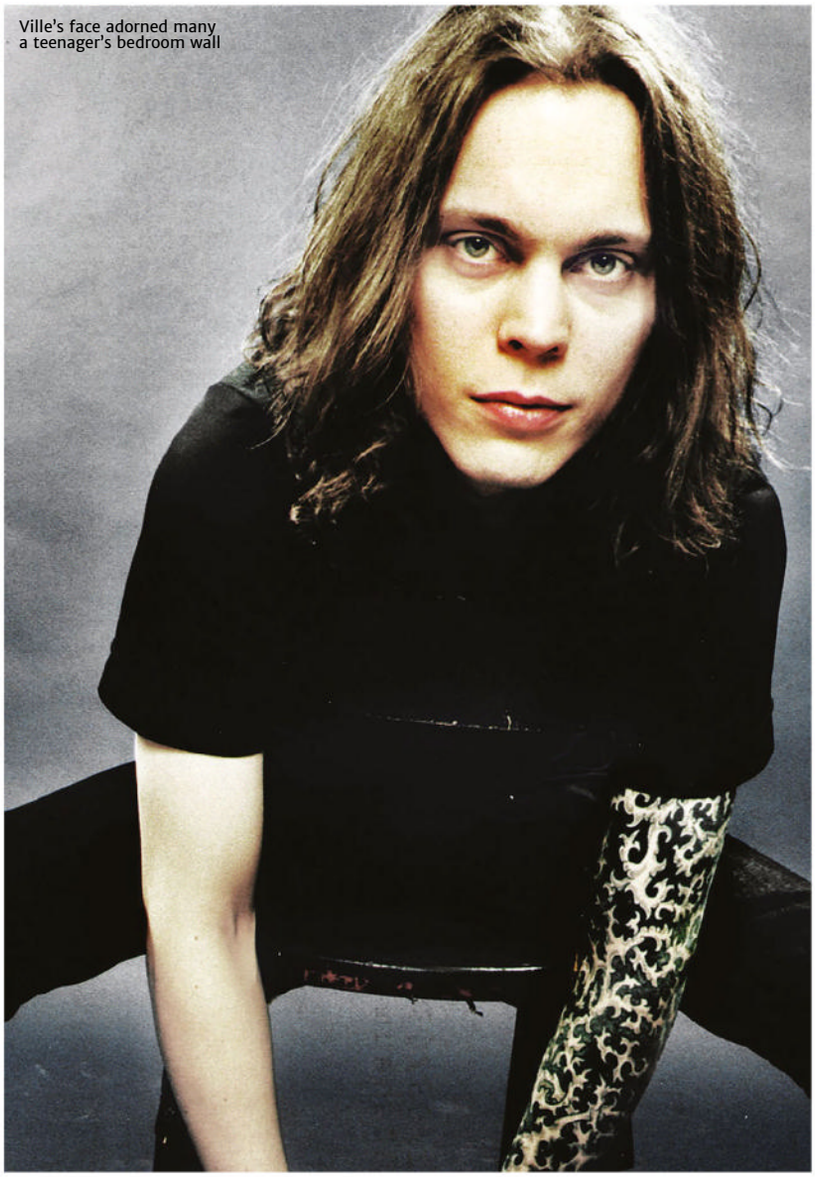
He remembers the time he flew to New York to meet a girl in the summer of 2003.

"Bam sent a limo for me to bring me to his house, and there was this massive, wild party going on when I arrived," he says. "We'd known Bam since 2000 – I met him when we played The Garage in London – and we'd taught him how to party, and he'd learned well! The whole time was a real honeymoon period for us. We were meeting with all these American record label executives, people like Seymour Stein and Jimmy Iovine, and they'd be telling these amazing stories, and we were just hypnotised and in awe. It was so cool, such a special time, a proper dreams-coming-true period for us. What a trip."

Before he leaves us, Ville shares an anecdote that brilliantly illustrates how his life changed after *Love Metal* propelled Him to the forefront of the contemporary hard rock scene. In December 2005, the singer was in London once again, and had arranged to meet myself, and our mutual writer friend Alexander Milas, the future Editor of *Metal Hammer*, for drinks in Soho rock bar Garlic & Shots on Frith Street, when a familiar face gatecrashed the gathering.

"All of a sudden I felt this hairy tongue on my face. I looked around and it was Dave Grohl," Ville laughs. "I'd never even met him before, so that's how we got introduced. Now, I'm not sure if Dave Grohl does that to everybody the first time he meets them, but I kind of felt special for a moment. *Love Metal* might not be the biggest metal album ever, or even the biggest album we ever made, but that was a moment that made me realise we weren't just another band anymore."

VV'S DEBUT ALBUM, *NEON NOIR*, IS OUT NOW VIA UMG/SPINEFARM



Ville's face adorned many a teenager's bedroom wall

"Sea at 6am!"

Ville Valo talks us through every track on *Love Metal*

orchestral guitar with f-holes, which I still have, and all the heavy guitar parts were done with that thing. This has a sort of dreaminess that I like in music, where a song is kinda like a lava lamp and hypnotises you with its movement."

SOUL ON FIRE
"*Soul On Fire* was always a live favourite, and I'm actually still playing it with my new project. I think it's a good example of us playing like a band with a lot to prove, playing like our batteries were charged to the brim. We were listening to Iggy And The Stooges' [1973 album] *Raw Power* and Queens Of The Stone Age's [2000 album] *Rated R* at the time, and this has some of that swagger and punky energy."

THE SACRAMENT
"I wrote this on the piano and then it sounded quite a bit different played on that synth. I wanted this to be a bit like *This Corrosion* by The Sisters Of Mercy, but [keyboardist] Burton and our drummer wanted it to feel more classical, which stopped it sounding too 80s. When I'm writing songs, I can play one section over and over for hours, trying to get it right, and while I was writing this, I remember that the guy downstairs from me, Johnny Lee Michaels, the producer of another Finnish band, The 69 Eyes, was having a big argument with his girlfriend. They paused for a minute, and he shouted out, 'Hey, you cunt upstairs, can you stop playing for a moment so we can get this fight over with?' That was when I knew I needed to move house."

THIS FORTRESS OF TEARS
"I remember that this was [ex-Cathedral vocalist and Rise Above Records boss] Lee Dorrian's favourite song on the record, and we didn't ever really intend playing it live, but because Lee liked it so much we had to. To me, it has the same vibe as *Sweet Pandemonium*, it's a bit more mellow."

CIRCLE OF FEAR
"The guitar parts on this, to me, are reminiscent of The Mission, or [Mancunian rock band] The Chameleons, as I was flirting with that kind of mid-80s post-punk or whatever you want to call it, with a bit of *Eye Of The Tiger* thrown in. When you mix Rocky with [French poet, Charles] Baudelaire, that's when you get the goods!"

ENDLESS DARK
"There's one song on every album that you just can't get right forever, and then it suddenly falls into place. The guitar part was influenced by Radiohead's *Street Spirit*, as that was on MTV all the time when it came out, and this is sort of that idea mixed with the *Suspiria* soundtrack by Goblin."

THE PATH
"This is kinda The Ronettes meets Black Sabbath, quite a traditional-sounding song. It takes like, two or three minutes, before, all of a sudden, these massive guitars erupt from nowhere, and that was a very Him thing to do."

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THE HAMMER INTERVIEW

COREY TAYLOR

Broken necks, melting masks, and booze-fuelled near-death experiences – welcome to the chaotic life of an icon

WORDS: DAVE EVERLEY • PICTURES: PAMELA LITTKY

Corey Taylor is suffering. That's not unusual for the Slipknot frontman, but this is different. "My allergies," he says, voice tinged with hoarseness, as he sits down on a sofa in a backstage portacabin at Download festival, where Slipknot will make their record-equalling fifth headline appearance in less than 90 minutes' time.

He arrived at his hotel in Birmingham at 3.30 this morning, and had to get up at 7am. "The only thing holding me together is duct tape and the fact that I have a day off tomorrow," he says, with the demeanour of man who has done this many, many times before.

Corey is in Castle Donington today on Slipknot business, but the 49-year-old Iowan has a new solo album coming down the pipe. *CMF2* is the follow-up to his 2020 debut, *CMFT*. It doubles down on its predecessor's joyous punk-infused hard rock, but sounds more focused and less patchwork than that sometimes chaotic debut.

His main band's recent travails – the departure of sampler/keyboardist Craig Jones, founder and percussionist Shawn 'Clown' Crahan's decision to stay at home due to his wife's health issues (though he makes a surprise appearance at Download) – are off limits. Still, there's plenty of other stuff to get into. "Interrupt me if I go on," he says. "I've got a habit of talking too much."

Who was the band that made the young Corey Taylor think, "I can do that"?
"Seeing Faith No More on the [MTV] *Video Music Awards* in 1990. It was the day of my last attempt at suicide. I had attempted it a couple of times before. This time, I'd just hit the bottom of the bottom. I'd taken a handful of pills from the bathroom – I didn't know what they fuck they were. Luckily, my ex-girlfriend's mom, who was an EMT, happened to stop by my house to check on me 'cos she knew what I was going through. She found me on the floor, called 911, and they rushed me to hospital and pumped my stomach, which I don't recommend.

"My grandmother came and picked me up from the hospital. I was lying on the couch, thinking, 'Why am I doing this?' I turn on the television and here comes Faith No More playing *Epic*. They sounded amazing, Mike Patton was out of his gourd. The next day I started putting signs up in guitar places, looking for people to start bands with. And that's where it all started."

Where did you meet Clown for the first time?
"At the city jail. We were both there to bail people out. [Original Stone Sour drummer] Joel Ekman and some friends had been evicted from this house which was being torn down, so we decided to destroy it. We broke every window, destroyed every bathroom. I finally crawled into the back of somebody's car and passed out, and they took me home. A couple of hours later I get a call. It's my buddy Marty: 'Dude, they all got arrested, we got to bail them out.' So I begged and borrowed enough money for bail, and when I went down there, Clown was there to bail his people out – they'd been arrested too."

What were your first impressions of him?
"He was a very affable man. It always amazes me that our bands had never played together – I had Stone Sour at the time, he had Heads On The Wall. And I'd seen Slipknot, they were amazing. The more I hung out at his bar, that was when I really got to know him. I just knew he was an odd cat."

"I KNEW STONE SOUR WOULD NEVER HAVE THE SAME IMPACT AS SLIPKNOT"

Define 'odd'…
"He has one of my favourite minds in the world, but he has a tendency to butcher the English language. What happens is that his mind is so fast that it's already racing ahead to the next thing, but his mouth hasn't caught up to it yet, so this jumble of amazing English comes out and it's beautiful.

"But I love the way he looks at life, the way he creates art, the way he talks. And his vision has never strayed – it's branched out but it's never strayed. I don't think he gets enough credit for what he's brought to the table in Slipknot."

When did you realise that things were starting to take off for Slipknot?
"We had a sense that something was happening was when we played the Astoria [in London on December 13, 1999, their first UK show]. Coming from Des Moines, when do you think you're ever going to be able to play London, for fuck's sake? We were just wide-eyed: 'Oh *fuuuuck*.' We came out and it was packed and people were hanging from shit. I'd never seen anything like it. Everyone I meet, regardless of age, has said they were there. There's no fucking way, 'cos the capacity of the Astoria would have been 100,000 people, but I love the fact that show has become this legend people talk about."

Things went from 0 to 60 in a split second for Slipknot. What was it like being in the middle of it?
"I gotta be honest, I don't know. We had our heads ducked down, just running for the sun. We were gonna do this over everybody's bodies. I went through three relationships in that time – they crumbled 'cos I was never at home. It's one of the few regrets I have, that I didn't poke my head up and take a second to drink it in. I was fucking gone."

What was the single greatest moment for you during those early years?
"There was a great moment when we did Ozzfest UK [in 2001]. The *Iowa* album hadn't come out yet, so it was brand new music, and people were just really chuffed that we were back. We got our photo taken with Ozzy Osbourne by [legendary rock photographer] Ross Halfin, I got to get up and do *Jumpdafuckup* with Soulfly. I remember that day as feeling like the pinnacle of, 'We've made it.' But things were getting very dark after a minute because of the booze. We really went off the fucking rails."

How dark is dark?
"I was a full-blown alcoholic. I wanted to stay drunk so I could do horrible shit because of my depression, because of my lack of self-confidence. I had become every cliché I hated because of it. You may have a family at home, but you may be running around fucking 10 chicks a night because of that lack of self-love. When you drink that much booze, who you are becomes very washy. There's something in you that's empty. Something in you that feels like chewing tinfoil.

"Health-wise, it was really fucking me up. The first three months of working on *Vol.3* were a washout for me, because my voice was so shot from the boozing and the lifestyle. I couldn't stay in key, I couldn't hit any of the heavy shit, I'd get half a take and I'd spoil it. The other guys did not appreciate it: 'Goddamn it, dude, you're never fucking here, you're always wasted, it's obvious you don't give a fuck.'"

What was the wake-up call for you?
"All the dramas in my life catching up with me. My fiancée at the time, later my wife [Scarlet, his first wife], had come out to LA to see what the fuck I was up to and confront me about it. We got a room at [LA hotel] The Hyatt House,

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Corey's body may be suffering, but his spirit is strong as fuck

When Corey gets onstage, he gives it his all – just like footballers in the Superbowl

we were going to talk, but we went out and I got fucking shit-faced. That was when I tried to jump off the balcony of this eighth-storey room. My friend Tom grabbed the back of my shirt and pulled me back. It was a heavy night."

When did you get sober?
"The first time was literally the next day. It lasted three years, until my marriage ended. Then I started drinking again for about three years until it was, like, 'I don't get anything from this anymore.' That was 2010. Trust me, it's a struggle every day 'cos of how my brain works and how I am as a person."

The first decade of Slipknot: what does the pie chart of 'fun' versus 'not fun' look like?
"There were some great moments. Headlining Download for the first time [in 2009]. I can remember us all looking at each other, going, 'Fucking hell, we've done it. Even if we never get to do it again, we get to do it tonight.' I look back on those days with great fondness now, especially knowing that they were my last days with Paul [Gray, late Slipknot bassist]."

Do you think about Paul Gray and [late drummer] Joey Jordison a lot?
"Constantly. Especially when we're onstage. Even with Paul fighting his demons, and there were definitely moments that sucked, we had some great fucking times when he was sober. We had great talks, great nights, making each other laugh. He was just a fucking unique person. Joey's another thing. His demons were so strong that it was hard to see past them."

Just as Slipknot were taking off, you reactivated your old band, Stone Sour. Why?
"It was a very selfish thing. I knew that at the time I didn't write music as good as the guys in Slipknot, I wasn't confident in my abilities, I contributed that much [makes tiny space between his thumb and index finger]. There were times when some of us felt pushed out of the writing process because of Joey and Paul. They'd started writing immediately and the rest of us were, like, 'We just want to take a second…' Reforming Stone Sour meant I got better as a songwriter and was able to contribute music to Slipknot. But it came from a purely selfish place of just wanting to feel like I could do it."

With Slipknot, you'd joined somebody else's band. Stone Sour was your baby. Was there part of you that wanted Stone Sour to become bigger than Slipknot?
"[Emphatically] No. 'Cos I knew we would never have the same impact. You have one chance at grabbing lightning, and Slipknot was that chance. When I was young, maybe I wanted to have more credit [for Slipknot] from an ego standpoint. It's only in retrospect that you can look at it and go, 'I was actually a very big part of it.'"

We're talking about Stone Sour in the past tense…
"Yeah. I'm in no hurry to do it again, let's put it that way. Why? The reasons are nobody's business."

Is it true that you almost replaced Scott Weiland in Velvet Revolver?
"It is. It was very close according to reports. They kept shit close to their chests, so I don't know. And I was ready to go, but I think it had to do with internal issues. All I know is that I had a fucking brilliant time hanging out with those guys. We recorded some songs, did some demos."

What happened to the demos?
"Somebody's got them. I haven't heard any of them. I know Matt [Sorum, drums] has reached out to all of us about

KATJA OGRIN

possibly using one of the songs that had been written, having us all play on it and put it out for a charity thing. I was fine with it: I was like, 'I just want to re-record the vocals.' They were very much demos - you go in, blast it out, get some ideas down. But some of it was really, really good."

Can we talk about your physical ailments?
"Oh yeah."

You revealed in 2016 that you'd broken your neck. What happened?
"I'm not sure, but I think what happened was that I fell offstage in 1999 and landed straight on top of my head. When you're 25, you can shake it off: 'OK, I can still move, I'm fine.' But then you exacerbate that with 16, 17 years of headbanging and windmilling… There were pieces of bone jutting into my spine. I could feel it – there'd be moments onstage where'd get an electric shock through my body, and that was the bone hitting my spinal cord. My C5 and C6 [vertebrae] were pretty much destroyed. They replaced the disc, shaved the bone back. I have a loss of strength on my right side, my balance can be wonky…"

And then you had surgery on your knees…
"Yeah. There was a bunch of scar tissue, there was evidence that I had torn my MCL [medial collateral ligament] and it rehealed like shit, so I had hard time bending my knees."

Are there times where you wonder if it's been worth the damage?
"Oh god, yeah. Of course. But then you go onstage and it just all goes away. It's like the football player who wants to win the Superbowl – the passion and the flesh haven't given up yet, and there's still the chance you can get back into the big game. Every night for us, we want to win the Superbowl. But I have talked to my wife recently about how much longer I want to do this, physically. I figure I've maybe got another five years."

Have you had that conversation with the rest of the band?
"We've all had talks about it together. We all worry about it. Especially Clown, he's had serious shit. Sid's [Wilson, DJ] obviously bionic at this point. Mick's [Thomson, guitarist] had bulging discs in his back, but he's completely turned his health around. He's in the best shape I've seen him in in 20 years."

Can you imagine a time when Slipknot aren't in your life any more?
"There have definitely been moments where I've questioned it. There have been moments where I've gone, 'What am I doing here? Why am I here?' But we've all talked, and none of us want to lose this yet. We're loving the fact that people are still loving it.

"I wouldn't stop making music. I'd just stop touring like this. The worst thing about touring is the time away from your kids. I've lost a lot of time with [my son] Griff. I've been trying to make up for it with my daughter. If my wife and I have a child… I can't imagine being that 60-year-old on the road, fucking himself up, then going home and thinking, 'I'm gonna be able to pick up a child and take care of it.'"

Your son, Griffin, has his own band, Vended. Given your past, does that worry the dad in you?
"The dad in me is constantly worried about him. He's gonna be 21 this year, and I'm still, like, 'Oh god…' At the same time, I have to let him do his own thing, and I love what he's doing – nobody is more proud than I am. Have I tried to give him advice? Sure, but he's got that Taylor gene where you don't learn anything unless you've had the shit kicked out of you."

Your first solo album, *CMFT*, was great, but it felt like a collection of songs that had been written at different points over the last 20 years. The new one sounds more cohesive.
"There's some songs that are very old. The bones for *Beyond* have been around since 2005, 2006. The song *Midnight*, I did a demo of that when I was putting Stone Sour back together in 2000-ish. Some songs are new. But we went out and toured [as a solo band], doing things from all the things I've done – solo stuff, Slipknot, Stone Sour, occasional covers – and it made me realise we had an audience for this. That's when I started putting real energy and focus into this.

Midnight* is the bleakest song on the album. You sing: *'I don't want to be here anymore.'
"It's very much about a moment in your depression when there's almost a numbness that happens. There's been moments in my life where I've been so detached, emotionally and psychologically, that I've had to just lay down on the ground and almost ride the Earth to get through it."

You've brought up depression and suicide. Are you OK talking about that stuff?
"You have to be. If you don't talk about it, you can't get a grip on what you dealt with and why. As a teenager, you feel things much harder 'cos you don't have coping mechanisms. But I'm blessed now, in that my wife has the patience of a saint. When I physically feel it coming on, I tell her, 'It's going to be a weird couple of days.'"

"I'VE GOT MAYBE FIVE YEARS OF TOURING LIKE THIS"

People see you on the stage in various incarnations and you look like a superhero to them.
"Right. At the same time, that's one of the reasons I try to be as open about it as possible. I want them to see me less as a [makes air quotes] 'superhero' and more like: 'You never know what this person is going through at any given moment; the fact is he's doing his very best to make sure people are having an amazing time.' That's what I want people to take away from it all: that we all have the capacity to rise above our station, to have the capacity to get our legs under ourselves and deal with adversity."

What's the song you're proudest of being involved with – the one that shows the best of Corey Taylor?
"That's tough. It's a different one for every band. With CMFT, it's *Beyond* from the new album. I started at the drawing board and rebuilt it into something that was way better than the demo ever was. With Slipknot it would probably be *Snuff*. With Stone Sour, it would probably be *Zzyzx Rd.*, largely because I wrote that song using two fingers on a piano. It's the quintessential longing-for-home track. Years later, going from [CMFT solo track] *Home* into *Zzyzx* [live onstage]…, that made me proud.

Last question: have you kept hold of all your old masks?
"I've got most of them. Some of them just melted – they ruined the carpet in my first apartment. And their smell starts to get weird. There's something that comes out of my face that's very toxic."

***CMF2* IS DUE FOR RELEASE ON SEPTEMBER 15 VIA DECIBEL COOPER/BMG**

THE Prince OF WALES

Skindred's Benji Webbe loves Newport and Newport loves Benji Webbe right back. And the city's favourite son is about to give *Metal Hammer* his personal guided tour

WORDS: STEPHEN HILL • PICTURES: TINA KORHONEN

Newport Market is a good place to shelter from the rain on a wet Wednesday morning. A grand, cast iron structure built in 1854 to house local produce from butchers, fishmongers, greengrocers and the like, it underwent massive regeneration in 2022 and is home to a series of artisan bakeries, coffee shops and art galleries. Right now, with employees setting up for the day and a smattering of elderly locals enjoying cake and a natter, it's quiet and peaceful. At least until…

"Beep beep! Welcome to Newport!" shouts Benji Webbe, Skindred singer and unrelenting hype man for his hometown, as he careers towards *Hammer* on a lowrider bike. "You found it alright, then?" he says, loudly. "Come on, I'm going to take you round my ends!"

You'd imagine the arrival of this ball of energy clad in a leopard-print tracksuit would prompt looks of disapproval from the pensioners in the vicinity, but apparently not. "Morning, Benj!" is the general reaction, followed by a smile and a wave.

This is a good time to visit Benji on his home turf. Not only are Skindred about to release their new album, *Smile* (the first since 2018's *Big Tings* and their eighth in total), but 2023 also marks their 25th anniversary. The band that started in a rehearsal room underneath a boxing gym – which we'll visit later today – have gone on to become one of the UK's most unique and adored bands.

Throughout it all, they've been intrinsically linked to this city of 160,000 in South Wales. If Skindred have a fifth member, it's Newport itself, which is why we're here to get a guided tour of the town from its unofficial Mayor.

"Newport's the first place Joe Strummer picked up a guitar," says Benji, name-checking the late Clash singer and punk icon as *Hammer* attempts to keep pace with his lowrider on foot. "They say that him going to Notting Hill was what inspired The Clash to explore reggae. I don't think so, I think it was him going to the gigs around here. That's why this place is important to Skindred, we're part of that legacy."

Our first port of call is Kriminal Records, the shop where Benji bought his first ever records. Unsurprisingly, store owner Dean is more than familiar with our host.

"Oh, fuck me, here we go!" he says as he opens his door.

"Shut up and get the kettle on!" says Benji, winking.

It must be cool to have a proper rock star coming into your shop, Dean?

"I'm his mate, I'm not his fan!" Dean chortles, before looking over at Benji, who is thumbing through some CDs. "If you want respect, you've come to the wrong fucking shop!" The two men crack up.

Music was always playing in Benji's house when he was growing up. Both his parents died when he was a child, and he was raised by his older brother, who had control of the house record player. "Until one day, my Auntie Maggie from Coventry gave me a tenner, my first ever tenner," he says. "I came in here and bought my first record, *Loonee Tunes!* by [80s Two-Tone jesters] Bad Manners, and a pasty and chips, which I ate waiting for the bus home."

Bad Manners' larger-than-life mix of ska and punk was a precursor of the music Benji himself would make as an adult, but his reggae-loving brother was less keen.

"I got home, walked up to that stereo, put the record on the turntable and put that needle down. It started playing and my brother walks in and goes 'RRRRIIIIPPP' with the needle across the record. 'That's not real reggae,' he said. I stood up and went, 'What do you mean, not real? I like it!' Later on, he came back in and said to me, 'Yeah, fair play.' Ha ha!"

Benji has been coming to Kriminal Records for decades, for the tunes and the banter

"THE COMMUNITY HERE JUST ACCEPTED ME"

BENJI WEBBE

Benji soon began attending gigs in Newport. His first was reggae duo Clint Eastwood & General Saint, but he soon moved on to punk rock shows with his friends. He was the only black kid at those gigs, but he bats away the idea that it was an uncomfortable experience.

"I was just me," he snorts. "I'm hardly shy, am I? If I went and stood in the back and was like, 'Oh, should I be here?' then maybe I'd have felt it, but I bowled in there like I am now. I can honestly say the community here, they just accepted me, and that's why I never wanted to leave."

And he hasn't. Benji has remained in Newport his whole life. Except, that is, a short period in the 90s when he moved to Los Angeles. "It was about some girl," he says. "You know how it is."

Before we know it, he's back on his bike and we're heading out of Kriminal Records toward Le Pub, the venue where Skindred played their first show. As we trundle through the streets, people wander up and greet Benji like a mate, and he's got time for all of them. One gentleman is wearing a Skindred patch on one arm and on the other a patch of Benji's first band, ragga metal outfit Dub War. Which one does he prefer?

"Stone. Fucking. Roses!" he barks back at us.

"That's not a bad answer, that!" Benji replies with a grin.

Dub War were Benji's first crack at fronting a band. They released a pair of excellent albums on Earache Records, 1995's *Pain* and 1996's *Wrong Side Of Beautiful*, supporting the likes of Manic Street Preachers and The Stone Roses along the way. Newport itself became a mid-90s music hotspot, dubbed "the new Seattle" by the *The New York Times*. It was centred around iconic local venue TJ's, sadly now closed.

Everyone loves Mayor Benji

A nice pint of Trooper. How long until we get Skindred beer, Benji?

Le Pub, where Skindred played their first ever gig. There should be a plaque, really...

"It was exciting times around here back then," says Benji. "Dub War, Feeder, [indie punk outfit] 60ft Dolls, we all played at TJ's, which was round the corner. Great scene."

Benji pulls his bike over outside Le Pub. An unassuming-looking venue, it's advertising upcoming shows by the likes of Cancer Bats and South Wales band Himalayas, who have just been confirmed as support for Foo Fighters on a handful of dates of their UK stadium tour.

Benji proceeds to tell us a story about the night of Skindred's first gig, where members of various Welsh bands turned up at Le Pub to see his new project. One of these was the now-disgraced vocalist of a Welsh band, who Benji overheard saying that Skindred would "never be as good as Dub War" as he was coming down the venue's staircase.

"I just said, 'Yeah, they'll be shit, won't they?' as I passed him," laughs Benji. "He bricked it. I think when Dub War ended and I started Skindred, there were a few people that I had to prove wrong. They maybe thought I'd had my shot and I should give it up."

He pauses to buzz the venue's intercom. "Open the door then!" he hollers, but no one answers, so we head to the nearby McCann's Rock N Ale Bar instead.

As we get comfortable in McCann's, Benji hands out some Skindred branded beermats for the venue, who pour us some complimentary pints of Iron Maiden's Trooper Beer in return. Talk turns to Skindred's new album. *Smile* might be the broadest album the band have ever made. It still features their signature reggae/punk/metal mash-up, but it brings more contemporary and even pop elements to the party.

"I don't mind that at all," says Benji. "I think the pandemic gave us a lot of time to think and to agonise over what we were doing. If we'd had to put it out like normal then we might not have made this record, it might have just been another Skindred record. But we want to reach people, that's all I've ever wanted to do – spread positivity through music. Yeah, this has some new flavours on it, but we got new people we want to reach."

Pints downed, Benji hops back on his bike and guides us through Newport's main high street. Once again, he's stopped multiple times – everyone from middle-aged men who've known him for years to young lads who see him as a local legend and want to look at his bike. Even a postman grabs him for a chat.

"He really is the Mayor of Newport," the postie says. As he wanders off, he bellows: "Benji for Prime Minister!"

Benji erupts into laughter. "See, I told you," he says. "These are just good people. Normal, working class people. My kind of people."

Newport itself is a proudly working class city and, like all working class cities, its history has been a rollercoaster ride. Its proximity to the River Usk meant it became an important transport hub for coal and iron during the Industrial

Revolution in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It was a time of great growth for the town, but there was unrest too.

"This is where the march happened," says Benji, pointing towards the now-empty Westgate Hotel. He's referring to the Newport Rising, the largest armed uprising in Welsh history, which saw 4,000 sympathisers of the working class Chartist movement march on the town in 1839 in an attempt to effect social change.

"They were protesting because they wanted the vote," he says. "They came down that hill and soldiers started shooting at them from the hill. They killed 22 people."

Newport was redeveloped in the 1960s and 70s, and the uprising's leader, John Frost, was commemorated with a square in the town centre. Yet Newport suffered in the same way that many other former mining communities in Wales did, another victim of the decline of British industry.

The local music scene became the main source of pride for the town during the harsh years of the 1980s and 1990s. Newport was awarded City status in 2002, the same year Skindred's debut album, *Babylon*, was released. Since then it has refurbished many of the classic buildings, and hosted golf's Ryder Cup and the 2014 NATO summit.

"I remember all the old places," says Benji. "I like the new ones, they're nice, don't get me wrong, but those old buildings had character."

He nods towards the Westgate Hotel. "Look at that. Beautiful, innit."

There's one important stop-off left on our guided tour of Newport: Skindred's birthplace. We head over to St Joseph's boxing gym. Underneath is a small studio run by the singer's old friend, Jamie, who is here to meet us.

"The first time Skindred ever played was in that room," Benji tells us as we walk into the studio, pointing through to a tiny area filled with vinyl and a mixing desk. "It was me, Dan [Pugsley] on bass and Jamie scratching over us."

Jamie nods his head and puffs out his cheeks. "That was a very long time ago."

Just as Dan's name is mentioned, he appears. Alongside the singer, he's the longest-serving member of Skindred. He was still in his teens when the pair met and began creating music together.

"This brings back so many memories," he smiles as he looks around the room. "I just wanted to make music with Benj, and so I upped sticks from Southampton and we made it work. I lived in Newport for about 10 years."

We're soon joined by guitarist Mikey Demus and drummer Arya Goggin. Both joined Skindred in 2002 and had their stints living in Newport, before the trio all relocated to various parts of the country.

"I still love coming back here," says Arya. "It's got a lot of amazing memories for all of us. I can come back having not been here for years and people still think I live here. 'Just got back from America, have you?'"

We head upstairs to the gym, and the members of Skindred get in the ring for a photoshoot. Halfway through, gym owner Joe wanders in. "Bloody hell," he exhales, before greeting the band. "What a blast from the past! You boys been up to much?"

"We just did Glastonbury," Benji replies.

"Not bad going," nods Joe. "Hold there Benj, I got something for you." He nips into his office and comes back with a laminated Skindred poster from the band's earliest days.

"Look at that," marvels Benji. "We hadn't even got our fucking logo sorted out at that point. I'd never have believed it would be 25 years of this if you'd have told me back then…"

With the shoot over, we head to our final stop: Benji's favourite Indian restaurant, Punjab Tikka. It's an unassuming little gaff, but we're assured it'll be worth it.

London? No, thanks. I'm just fine right here

Sick wheels. Nice drip

Cycling in sliders, no helmet… Benji, you're not a great advert for road safety, mate!

"I always looked at this place and never thought to go in," he says, as we settle in and place our order. "Then one day, after a few beers on a night out, it was empty and I decided to give it a go. It's beautiful! And I've never gone anywhere else since! It just goes to show, you don't ever judge a book by its cover."

He gestures towards the guy who is placing a series of massive plates filled with various curries and some naan breads in front of us. "He used to work in a big restaurant and one day he's had enough. He just wanted his own little place. It might not look like much, but he's happy."

Fair to say you're the same, right, Benji? You could have stayed in LA or moved to London, but you chose not to.

"And I wouldn't change it for the world," he says. "Sometimes you just find your place, and this is my place. Yeah, it's not the most glamorous part in the world, but it's exciting to me. I love the people and I don't think Skindred would sound like we do without Newport. And we don't sound like anyone else, so it's given us a lot to be grateful for."

The Mayor Of Newport has spoken.

***SMILE* IS RELEASED ON AUGUST 4 VIA EARACHE**

Skindred (left to right): Mikey Demus, Arya Goggin, Benji Webbe, Dan Pugsley

"WE WANT TO SPREAD POSITIVITY THROUGH MUSIC"

BENJI WEBBE

"SUDDENLY A *trout* HIT MY FACE!"

We got frontman Benji Webbe to interview his bandmates – with predictably ridiculous results

MIKEY DEMUS (guitars)

Benji: "After getting hit full in the face with a fish while onstage, did you then develop a phobia of fish?"

Mikey: "Well… no. But once you've been hit in the face with a fish, it does make you a bit more wary. It was at a festival we headlined, and suddenly this fish just hit my face and landed on my pedal board… like a full-blown trout. I think the guy who threw it thought it was an offering, like 'Thank you, Skindred, for headlining our festival.' He had been carrying that round all day. Bizarre."

Benji: "How did it feel when I ripped your shirt off while you were playing Warped Tour USA in 2002?"

Mikey: "I dunno what you were doing. It was weird. I had this pocket on my shirt, you pulled the pocket and the entire shirt just ripped off, revealing my… person. If you did that now I'd clout you with my guitar."

ARYA GOGGIN (drums)

Benji: "When the band had a day off at an adventure park in Switzerland, who did the best out of the band, and who did the worst?"

Arya: "So, we had a couple of days in this place, we went to see Zucchero [Fornaciari, Italian singer/songwriter], had a few beers, and the next day we decided to do this zip wire. It was fucking high up, man! I got the walkie-talkie call to go next, I'm speeding along, and I just see Benj hanging there, stuck! He's like 'Brace yourself!' and I smashed into him, cut my lip… then we find out they had only been open for two months. Never again!"

Benji: "Is it true that ice sculptures developed inside the tour bus after the air-con broke while Skindred were touring Finland?"

Arya: "Very true. It was so cold, I cannot even begin to explain. Like, five pairs of socks cold… like hiking Everest cold… but without the gear. It was awful."

DAN PUGSLEY (bass, programming)

Benji: "Is it true that you and Arya had a knife pulled on you in Hamburg while you were doing your laundry?"

Dan: "So weird. Once your laundry is in, you're there, right?! You can't leave until it's done. This guy came up to us and told us he was Iggor Cavalera, got a knife out, told us he hated Americans and we just had to leg it. He was mad as a trumpet."

Benji: "Do you remember Skindred touring in a prison van once, and was it cold?"

Dan: "I did, and it was. There were several iterations of the prison van, one of them set fire to one of our friends' hair. We had to turn the heating up full blast and he was in his bunk, and we could all just smell burnt hair. I remember getting ready to do a session in Maida Vale [in West London] once… it was so cold you could see your breath. I just remember thinking, 'What am I doing with my life?'"

CAN YOU FEEL MY HEART?

When Vexed frontwoman Megan Targett lost her grandpa, the band wrote an EP about thinking positive. Insincere and hollow, they scrapped it to make one of 2023's most authentic albums

WORDS: EMILY SWINGLE • PICTURES: ANDY FORD

VEXED
NIKE

On May 21, 2021, Hertfordshire crew Vexed released their debut album, *Culling Culture*. What should have been a day of celebration turned into panic, as frontwoman Megan Targett's grandpa was rushed to hospital and subsequently diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis (a scarring of the lungs). He was given a life expectancy of 18 months, but passed away after three.

For years, he had been Megan's main parental figure. Now it felt like her life had been turned upside down.

"When you lose a parent… you're just a kid again," Megan says today, talking to us via Zoom from the farm where she lives, and stripped of the make-up she wears onstage and in photos. "You're just hyper-aware of how much you depend on them – suddenly you're like, 'What do I do if I need to insure my car?' I'd open the fridge and start to yell upstairs about there being no milk… and then you remember."

Though it might not seem like it on first listen, Megan's openness and vulnerability lies at the heart of Vexed's music. Their tech metal onslaught centres around her demonic gutturals, but it's elevated by unsettling themes and cut-throat lyrical content. From abuse, to body image, to mental health, the band confront the uncomfortable, amplifying the whispers of buried trauma and bringing them to the surface.

Drawn together through their love of music, with Megan meeting drummer/fiancé Willem Mason-Geraghty at Download Festival in 2016, and then bassist Jay Bacon at 2019's UK Tech-Fest, the trio previously performed together in a slew of what Megan labels "terrible proggy metal bands". They soon reached a breaking point.

"We started just taking the piss," Megan smirks. "We didn't enjoy the music anymore, so we'd come on to Cardi B songs, put stupid samples in the middle of breakdowns. We just wanted to channel our effort into something with a purpose…" And that's where Vexed came in.

Frazzled and furious, *Culling Culture* was an eclectic clash of deathcore and gruelling blastbeats, as Megan menacingly condemned abusers, manipulators and the general scum of the Earth. It was glowingly reviewed – not that Megan had much time to take in the reaction.

As she explains today, losing a parent changes everything. Initially raised by a young single mother and her mother's twin sister, Megan soon moved in with her grandpa. When he fell ill, she committed herself to caring for him 24 hours a day.

The eventual loss was immeasurable. Yet the world kept spinning, and their record label was breathing down their necks about a second album. Vexed got to work – and the result? An unbearably numb EP.

"Everything had a 'silver lining,'" Megan says, rolling her eyes as she remembers the positive lyrics they were desperately trying to conjure. "It was all 'Everything will be OK!' Very disingenuous – so we scrapped it."

While *Culling Culture* explored painful themes, nothing on it compared to the sting of Megan's grief.

"All three of us had lost crucial family members," Megan reflects, "so we talked about how terrible we felt, how we had no motivation… then we decided to write about it."

As music has always been Megan's outlet, it felt logical to pour her emotions into the band.

"I had a bit of a rocky childhood," she explains. "When I was 10, my mum's sister passed away and it hit me really hard – I ended up having to go to a school for kids who were badly bullied, because I'd been bullied over the resulting depression. At this school, there was a boy there who listened to Bring Me The Horizon and, when I heard it, I felt like I'd finally found my thing."

> **"WE STOPPED TRYING TO SUGARCOAT THINGS"**
> MEGAN TARGETT

Originally drawn to drums, hoping to "hide" at the back of the stage, Megan was eventually forced into the spotlight as a vocalist by her band at the time.

"I was about 16 when I started really trying to scream. I was terrible for a long time," she laughs. "My mum used to drive me around late at night, and I'd just *go* for it. But, from the age of 12, I was always writing lyrics, working through stuff."

The *Negative Energy* writing process became a form of therapy. Instead of clinging to 'silver linings', they dragged the monster out from under the bed by its ankles, kicking and screaming. "We stopped trying to sugarcoat things, and, through writing, we felt real purpose," Megan says.

Negative Energy is Vexed under a microscope, rumbling with an exposed, diary-entry level of authenticity far greater than the band's previous work. *Anti-Fetish* expands on 2019 single *Dominate*, commenting on gender bias in the music industry, while *We Don't Talk About It* intensifies allusions to childhood abuse originally explored on debut album track *Aurora*, going into searingly condemning specifics.

"Growth can really be seen if you compare *Purity* and *It's Not The End*," Megan says. "*Purity* tip-toed around the fear of my grandpa dying, and then *It's Not The End* is fully reflecting on him passing. We recorded it last – we all wanted to put it off. I was in the booth bawling."

"It was the hardest track to record," she adds. "My grandpa was always my biggest supporter; he'd tell everybody we were the best, go to his fishing clubs wearing a Vexed t-shirt – but it was funny because he hated it when I screamed. So I made sure that track has as many clean vocals as possible, because he would have preferred that."

Megan gave the vocal takes her all. "I didn't care about hitting notes perfectly – I wanted that emotion," she explains. "Our producer [Meyrick de la Fuente, Exist Immortal frontman] made me sing again and again, until my voice was breaking."

The recording process captures something not many records do – every scratchy shriek, pained howl and cracked cry is raw. "You can hit notes perfectly and make everything sound squeaky clean," she notes, "but where's the connection?"

While the record is a difficult listen, that's the point. Trauma is trauma. "I wanted to immerse the listener in that world," Megan explains. Take *Panic Attack*, with its breathless tempo and scraping sonics designed to overload the senses. "It's funny because negative reviews have all said they couldn't deal with the lyrics or how uncomfortable the record makes them feel… but that's the point?" she frowns.

But positive feedback makes it all worthwhile, reinforcing Megan's decision to sing about how she really feels inside.

"The other day I was watching someone react to our album online, and, bless her, she started crying… and then I started crying," Megan laughs. "I don't know how to react when people message, saying my lyrics have helped them, saved them. It's such a big deal. When you're going through trauma, abuse, or feeling awful in your own skin, you sometimes feel like nobody else has ever been through the same thing. When you talk about trauma, you realise you're not entirely alone."

As *Negative Energy*'s opening track says, *'recovery is a long and difficult process'*. It doesn't happen overnight, or even when you finish a record – but having an outlet can help.

"It's freeing to talk about trauma openly, even if it's still there," Megan reflects. "I've got a lot of work to do, but this album came along when I really needed it – it was a reason to get up in the morning. To me, *Negative Energy* is everything. It has destroyed me in the best way."

***NEGATIVE ENERGY* IS OUT NOW VIA NAPALM**

PRESS/ANDY FORD

Vexed (left to right): Willem Mason-Geraghty, Megan Targett, Jay Bacon

VEXED MATHS

The albums that shaped their sound

KING 810
La Petite Mort Or A Conversation With God (2016)
"That album made me fall in love with heavy spoken word. I love the varied vocal styles."

EMMURE
Look At Yourself (2017)
"Frankie Palmeri is my favourite heavy vocalist. I've always tried to emulate his screams."

MEGAN THEE STALLION
Traumazine (2022)
"Megan is just amazing, and this album is so open. I also found Rico Nasty through this album, and she's been a big lyrical inspiration."

LIFE AFTER METAL

Watchmaking, surgery, working on *Love Island* and standing in for Daniel Craig – these musicians prove that walking away from bands can lead down some interesting career paths

WORDS: PAUL TRAVERS

GETTY

THE MASTER WATCHMAKER
DAN SPITZ

Dan Spitz joined Anthrax in 1983 and served as their lead guitarist until 1995. He left to train as a watchmaker. He returned to the band briefly in the mid-00s, but today horology is his main focus.

"It comes from being in my grandfather's jewellery and watch store growing up. It was less than a mile from the original Woodstock site, so I had timepieces on one side and Jimi Hendrix waking me up playing *The Star-Spangled Banner* on the other. I really didn't have a choice in life!

"Back in 94/95, Anthrax were at the peak of our career, playing arenas, but I was the only one who was married with two kids at that point. My wife had travelled with us from the beginning, but it became impossible after our second child. When I left the stage I didn't know what real life was. It's very difficult to adjust, so I threw myself into something that was a challenge. I enrolled in a school in New York and graduated in a year and a half, before going to a prestigious school in Switzerland. They take six people from around the world every four years and I was chosen.

"There's a lot of similarities in what I do now and what I did with Anthrax. Watchmaking has evolved into micro-mechanical art because we don't need to have a watch on our wrists to tell the time like our grandparents. There's a movement of independent watchmaking, which means that we don't have the equivalent of a record company telling us what's in style today. We can make what we want, which is just how thrash metal was back in the 80s.

"There is no part in any timepiece made to mankind that I cannot manufacture within my facility. I'm a one-man show, which is my insanity. Other people have helpers. I use new technology and design and old micro-miniature lathes where I'm literally carving pieces by hand. The new piece I've been working on for five years is the first ever timepiece designed from the ground up for metalheads. I can't talk too much about it, but I can say there's nothing else like it. It has three patents pending on different mechanics and it's fucking mind-blowing. It's called the 100% METAL series one and this was always the goal, even when I was suffering in the Swiss winters at school. It's the same feeling as when we had the *Among The Living* album in the can but we couldn't play it to anyone.

"As far as music goes, I did some writing with Scott Stapp from Creed, but that's all I can do because I suffer from neuropathy, meaning my hands fall asleep and I have extreme carpal tunnel syndrome from playing with my wrists curled and my guitar too low. The thoughts of being onstage never leave me, but this career allows me to continue to be not normal and remain the metalhead I am."

"I'M WORKING ON THE FIRST EVER TIMEPIECE DESIGNED FOR METALHEADS"

THE ARTIST AND COSTUME DESIGNER
KIM DYLLA

Kym 'Vulvatron' Dylla was co-vocalist in Gwar for two years from 2014, before being fired. Luckily, she had plenty to keep herself busy.

"Dave Brockie [aka Oderus Urungus, Gwar frontman and co-founder who passed away in 2014 and who Kym partly replaced] and I were good friends, so it was great to be able to pay tribute to his legacy and make an impact – I heard from a lot of people who loved seeing a woman up there being a monster. You don't have to be a pretty princess, you can be a Scumdog. It was a great opportunity and I'm grateful to Gwar for giving me that. And I definitely miss the giant, blood-spewing tits on a daily basis!

"It sort of felt like a break-up, but I still make music and I had my clothing business, so it's not like I didn't have anything to do. The day-to-day of my job now is working 15-hour days designing and sewing, but the good part is when I get to fly over to Europe for the big festivals and see Machine Head headline Graspop wearing things I designed, or when I dressed the Abigail tour for King Diamond.

"I also created the style for [wrestler] Bray Wyatt from WWE. He had called me when I was on the road with Gwar and I answered as Vulvatron in character: 'What do you want, you pathetic piece-of-shit human?' He started wearing my post-apocalyptic style in the ring and then it became a trend. There's a whole period of wrestling where everyone's wearing post-apocalyptic and metal-looking clothing, and I can't help but feel I started that trend. He introduced me to people like Chris Jericho, who also sings in Fozzy, and I make things for him onstage and in the ring.

"My former career before Kylla Custom Rock Wear was in the field of digital archaeology and I also make art. My parents are high-energy physicists and I make giant photo-realistic paintings of large-scale physics equipment like stellarators. NASA and some of the big labs own my work and I show at physics conventions as well as in the art world.

"I'm also playing with the Irish band Cruachan, I have a studio project called The Burned Over, a local band called Ectoplasm, and there's a band with my boyfriend, Johan Söderberg from Amon Amarth, that isn't out yet. My idea of fun isn't sitting watching TV. I'm interested in a lot of things and sleep is the part that gets sacrificed."

"I MAKE PHOTO-REALISTIC PAINTINGS OF LARGE-SCALE PHYSICS EQUIPMENT"

GETTY

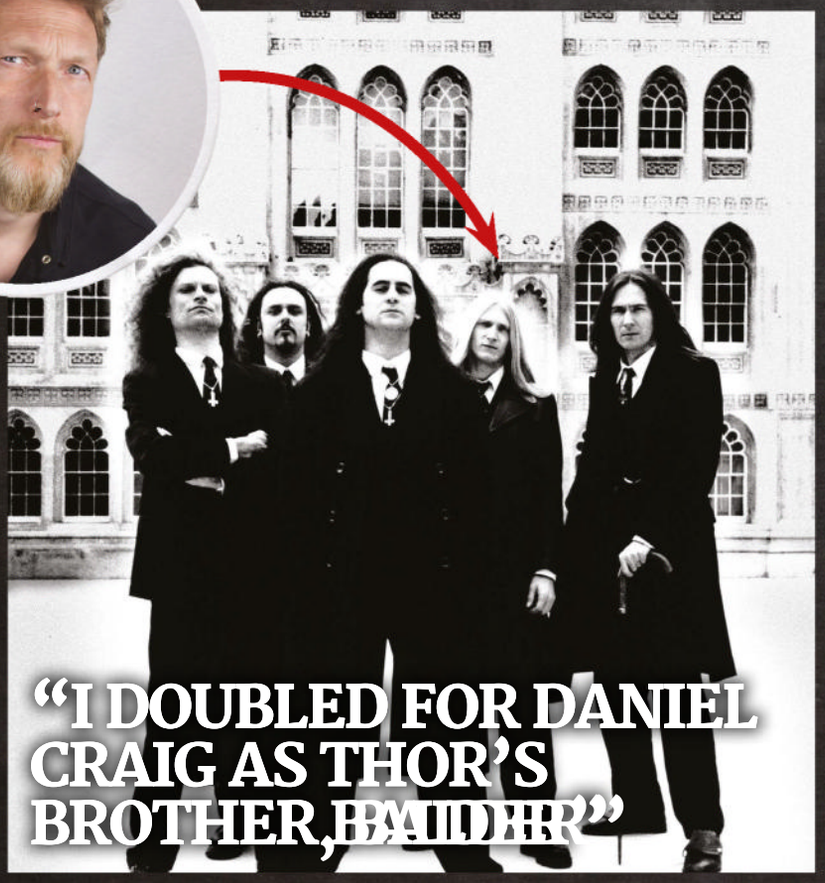
THE MOVIE EXTRA
PETER THEOBALDS

Bassist with UK extreme metallers Akercocke from 1997–2007, Peter Theobalds has appeared *Black Mirror*, *Luther* and *House Of The Dragon*, plus *Star Wars* and *Marvel* films.

"I was drawn to acting as a way to avoid having to get a 'real' job. Being in a band broke any ability to accept a repetitive daily grind, and I'd often walk out of jobs out of boredom. As most of my adult life I've had long hair and a big ol' beard, I'd get happily typecast as a Viking, medieval soldier, gangster, mercenary etc. Oddly enough, I've only ever once played a musician and even that was with an unplayable space guitar prop in a *Star Wars* cantina scene.

Solo: A Star Wars Story was the hands-down best experience 'cos it was a small set, a limited cast of characters, and we got to sit on set between takes and experience the principal cast work through lines and action. Another of my faves was chatting to sweary Muppets, their puppeteers remaining in character between takes on the *Muppets Most Wanted* movie. Another fave was picture doubling for Daniel Craig as Thor's brother, Balder [in *Doctor Strange In The Multiverse of Madness*] – dialogue and a dramatic death and surrounded by incredibly talented stunt performers on wires battling it out in an epic set-piece that was, sadly, scrapped in favour of a rewrite.

"It's an absolute honour and privilege to get to work on nearly all the projects I do. I genuinely love the work and being around incredibly passionate and driven creatives."



"I DOUBLED FOR DANIEL CRAIG AS THOR'S BROTHER, BALDER"

PRESS

THE BREWER
JEFF 'OLY' OLSON

Jeff Olson played drums with doom progenitors Trouble from 1981 to 2008 (with a brief hiatus), but found that doom doesn't pay the bills and left to find a more steady career in a brewery in Allagash, Maine.

"It was a hard decision to leave Trouble, but it had to be done. I have my own home with two acres in Maine, and a wonderful wife. It's a little crazy in the winter, but I build a rink and we skate and play hockey every year.

"I work at Allagash Brewery and through my whole career there I've done almost everything. There were about 13 of us to start and now there's a complete staff of about 170, so I've filled gaps at the company that no one was working at the time. Right now I'm the campus steward, where I'm basically the guy who does anything that's asked when we're building or working on something. I also got to make my own Red Howes beer, which was named after my grandfather. We named it after him but it had those cranberries in it as well. When we launched the beer, I played a solo concert and did a meet and greet.

"I don't talk much to the Trouble guys. Everybody is on their own journey, I understand that. I wrote some stuff with my friend, Mike Dean of Corrosion Of Conformity, and lots of songs are written for another recording with my Retro Grave project. Ultimately, I'm lucky to be part of a powerful world of music. The people of metal, rock drum corps, jazz and classical are all a family to me, and I would never change a thing about my reflection of the past."

"I MADE A BEER NAMED AFTER MY GRANDFATHER"

THE SURGEON
CHRIS LYKINS

Chris Lykins was the founder and guitarist with Arizona thrashers Atrophy, playing with them from 1986 until 1990, when he left to pursue a medical career.

"It was such a great time when everything was blowing up in the 80s. We were spoken of as contenders for the next big thing, but really it was pretty well established that the big bands were Metallica, Slayer, Megadeth and Anthrax. Even though there were a lot of second-tier bands coming through, it felt like it would have been very difficult to break through to the next level. Death Angel maybe had the chance and I thought Forbidden were fantastic.

"Touring through Europe with Sacred Reich was great, and we got to play the legendary Marquee in London and got spat on in Dublin – by kids who looked like they were having an awesome time. I'd put my med school plans on hold when we got signed and my father died from renal cell carcinoma while I was touring. That really gave me the impetus to reapply and I took my MCATs [medical exams] in Paris in the middle of that European tour.

"I took off when things were starting to go downhill, for thrash at least. In America you have to have four years in university followed by four years in medical school, and then my residency in head and neck surgery was six years. I kinda thought being a surgeon was like being a human mechanic. My dad was an airplane mechanic in the military and then an electrician. He could always fix anything, so maybe I thought I should learn to do something that my dad can't do!

"The details of my work week can vary, but I'll typically do three days of office and two days of surgery. Surgeries go from the simplest procedures, like putting tubes in a little kid's ear, to very complicated head and neck cancer cases or facial reconstructive cases that can last for hours. We'll do everything from tubes and tonsils to parathyroid tumours, skull base dissection or putting in a hypoglossal nerve stimulator for sleep apnea.

"Some patients know what I used to do. I've had a few who saw me perform and others who have searched for my name and pictures of me as a 22-year-old have popped up, which can lead to some fun conversations after they've gone down an internet rabbit hole. I also play in an Americana-type band for fun. I've cursory contact with some of the band but I still practise guitar for hours. Music never really leaves you."

"WE DO EVERYTHING FROM TONSILS TO SKULL BASE DISSECTION"

PRESS

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THE TV DIRECTOR
MATTHEW 'TUDS' ARCHER

Tuds Archer was the original drummer with Paradise Lost, playing with them from their formation in 1988 until 1994, when he 'fell into' television work.

"We were all mates who'd grown up together, but we all needed a break. I sort of fell into TV work. I went to a gig and ended up chatting to the boys from [MTV rock show] *Headbangers Ball*. I ended up doing a lot of off-camera interviews with bands, which led to an internship, and I was eventually offered a position at MTV. I had to make a decision and I jumped in feet first and decided to work in telly.

"It was the mid-90s, so I did stuff with the Pulps and Blurs when they were new bands coming through the door. I got flown out to do tour reports and I'd do stuff for *MTV's Most Wanted*. It mostly blurs into one, but interviewing James Hetfield or finding myself sitting three feet away from David Lee Roth, it just blows your mind.

"MTV was a great training ground and I ended up going down the *Big Brother* route. I did *24 Hours In Police Custody* and *24 Hours In A&E*. I also did *One Born Every Minute* on a labour ward and at the time I didn't even have kids. I was honorary uncle to about 100 babies born on the show! I've also worked on the likes of *Love Island* and *First Dates*, which I love.

"I'm still in touch with the Paradise Lost guys and me and Nick [Holmes, singer] are best mates. Most people from Halifax went straight to working in the Halifax Building Society – as it was then – when they left school. I think we've all done alright and if it does all goes wrong, me and Nick can open a pub."

"I'VE WORKED ON *LOVE ISLAND*"

THE INDEPENDENT CINEMA MANAGER
MATT DRAKE

Matt Drake fronted Brit thrash revivalists Evile between 2004 and 2020. He now runs The Amity Cinema in Holmfirth, West Yorkshire.

"I had quite a serious health scare – a pulmonary embolism, which was very scary after what happened to Mike [Alexander, Evile guitarist who died of the same condition in 2009]. It was one of those things where you look at things differently afterwards. I'd already started thinking about quitting Evile anyway because I'd become a dad.

"I'd always wanted to show films to people, but I never dared and I didn't know how. One of the things I really wanted to do with it was to show films that had been overlooked, but I also want to celebrate films that mean a lot to me. The room I'm using now is in an upstairs cocktail lounge at a place called Magic Rock and there's a full bar. It's not what you think of when you think 'cinema,' but it works so well. There's a crowd energy and if people want to quote along, laugh, cry or go for a drink you can. I also do mystery movies, which is great; you don't know what you're going to see until it starts. One of the best ones I did was Brian De Palma's *Blow Out* and the audience was completely still for the entire thing. I've only had one bad response, when I showed [1990 B-movie horror] *Tremors* and this guy was going, 'Oh, for fuck's sake!'

"As for the band, I only miss that hour onstage. Evile were never going to get to that stage where you're successful enough to get other people to do all the other stuff that needs doing. Being realistic, I thought, 'Nah, I'll just go and be a dad and show some films to people.'" MH

"WE SHOW OVERLOOKED FILMS"

PARADISE LOST: GETTY. EVILE: PRESS

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NOISE bastard NOISE

Biffy Clyro, Dave Lombardo and a whole lot of rage – this is how Simon Neil and Mike Vennart conjured up Empire State Bastard, 2023's most unlikely extreme metal supergroup

WORDS: STEPHEN HILL • PICTURES: JOHN McMURTRIE

Simon Neil's face has contorted into an expression of pure anger, verging on disgust.

"I just can't understand how people can be that fucking ignorant," he spits. "That fucking lacking in empathy or decency. It makes me sick."

He's just heard his friend, former Oceansize frontman and current Empire State Bastard bandmate Mike Vennart, recount a run-in he had with notorious right-wing agitator Tommy Robinson and his legion of troll followers. It's an event that could have had a depressing, negative impact, but the revulsion and venom Mike felt instead provided the seed that inspired this new extreme metal project.

We'll get to all that shortly, but first: Simon Neil. Yes, this is the same Simon Neil who fronts Biffy Clyro, one of the UK's most successful, if idiosyncratic, modern rock bands. The Scottish trio have scored three No.1 albums in the UK, headlined Download and the Leeds and Reading festivals multiple times, and even had Simon Cowell take their 2009 song *Many Of Horror* and repurpose it as a No.1 single for long-forgotten *X Factor* winner Matt Cardle under the title *When We Collide*.

Empire State Bastard are a completely different beast. The songs that make up their debut album, *Rivers Of Heresy*, sound like someone his zip-locked Converge, Amenra and early Hüsker Dü into a plastic bag and told them to murder each other. Jagged white noise, throat-shredding vocals and jackhammer rhythms – the latter provided by none other than ex-Slayer drummer Dave Lombardo, more on whom later – are the order of the day, putting even Biffy's most wilfully awkward moments in the shade. It's unlikely that Simon Cowell will be calling Empire State Bastard and asking to use one of their songs.

It may look like an unusual prospect on paper, but it turns out that both Simon Neil and Mike Vennart have fantasised about making music like this for years. All it took in the end were death threats and a global pandemic to make 2023's most unexpected musical left-turn a reality.

The two men met for the first time more than two decades ago, when Oceansize were about to sign to Beggars Banquet. They were scheduled to play a label showcase alongside a strangely named group they'd never heard of.

"They had this flagship band called Biffy Clyro," says Mike. "I was expecting them to be some psychedelic Welsh folk band. But, no, it was this really weird rock band."

Simon remembers the show too. He says Biffy were impressed but a little intimated by Oceansize.

"I don't want to blow smoke up Mike's arse," he says, "but I immediately felt like I knew everything about him from the way he sang and played guitar. I remember after the gig we sort of nodded, 'Right enough, we'll see you again.'"

That's precisely what happened. The two bands crossed paths several times over the next two years, becoming friends in the process. Simon knew that he'd end up playing with Mike one day, and so it proved when the latter joined Biffy Clyro as a touring guitarist in 2010, a year before Oceansize split. It was on the road together that they realised they shared a love for heavy music.

"We first got talking about *Angel Dust* by Faith No More, as we were both massive fans," Simon says. "But Mike was into [another one of FNM singer Mike Patton's bands] Fantômas. He introduced me to a lot of weird heavy music. I would say I was more into a different sort of heavy band at that point – [my tastes] were a bit more metal, and Mike was a bit more arty."

"LIFE'S TOO SHORT TO LISTEN TO THAT FUCKING CGI METAL SHIT"

SIMON NEIL

"I'd say so," Mike responds. "I remember very early on sending Simon a VHS of [another Mike Patton band] Mr. Bungle and [cult British art-rock mavericks] Cardiacs. I was so evangelical about those bands. I still am – I can still clear a party real fucking fast by putting those bands I love on."

This swap shop continued, with each of them seeking out exciting heavy music to pass on to the other. Simon would give Mike a Will Haven CD; Mike would reciprocate with a Sunn O)))) album. One day, around a decade ago, they floated the idea of starting a band inspired by their love of extreme sounds. They even came up with a name for it: Empire State Bastard. The only hitch was that the workload involved in

being a member of a band as successful as Biffy Clyro meant that neither could commit to it in the way they wanted.

"The one thing we didn't want to do was make it a throwaway thing," says Simon. "You know: 'Here are a bunch of heavy songs because we felt like making a few heavy songs.' We wanted to make a dynamite heavy record. We're steeped in the history of it, and we wanted to make something really special. That was why it took longer to gestate than we would have liked."

There was another reason for their hesitation. Mike admits that he was a little overwhelmed by the idea of what Empire State Bastard could or should be in those early days.

"Simon is a songwriting genius," he says. "I thought, 'How am I going to make this interesting for him?' I wanted it to be heavy, yes, but I wanted it to be weird, to freak people out. It's easy to make metal by numbers – we've all heard the million and one Meshuggah and Linkin Park rip-offs."

"Any metal album can be made on a fucking laptop," adds Simon. "But the best heavy music, the best extreme metal, has feel, it has soul. Life's too short to listen to that fucking CGI metal shit."

Instead of rushing it out, the pair decided to take their time, sitting on their dream extreme metal project until they knew exactly what they wanted it to be, waiting for the spark of inspiration to materialise. They tried everything from "weird big beat, distorted bass" to "really spazzy, Dillinger [Escape Plan] stuff", but none of it stuck. And then, in unexpected and not a little unpleasant circumstances, something changed.

"I snapped," says Mike, "and the dam burst."

In late December 2018, a few days before Christmas, Mike Vennart was walking through Piccadilly Station in his native Manchester when he spotted notorious far-right 'activist' and former English Defence League leader Stephen Yaxley-Lennon – commonly known as Tommy Robinson. Mike was so appalled by Robinson's past Islamophobic rhetoric that he felt compelled to approach him and explain just how damaging he believed his political stance was. It turned into a heated confrontation, which Robinson proceeded to live stream on Facebook. Within minutes, pictures Mike had been tagged in on social media were bombarded with abusive comments from Robinson's followers, including threats of violence and death.

"My mother was called a whore, my wife was called a whore, there were threats made against my kids," he sighs. "I had to get my house fireproofed, I had to call the cops. They tried to get me kicked off my management company, kicked out of Biffy…"

He decided to try and diffuse the situation by staying well away from social media, but the damage had been done. One night, unable to sleep due to the cocktail of unease, fury and stress he was experiencing, he felt compelled to try and process his feelings through music.

"It just happened one night," he says. "I had this song *Cold War* by [US proto-grindcore band] Siege in my head, that's just a punishing, fucking abrasive noise. I made a note on my phone that said, 'Make an album. Make all the songs sound like *Cold War* by Siege. Don't spend too much time over it. Don't matter if it sounds shit. Just make a punishing, fast, horrible album.'"

He couldn't shake the seething anger he felt. Knowing he couldn't reason with these people, he realised the only was he could deal with his feelings was to create music that reflected his mood. He awoke the next morning totally fired up. The depth of his anger and frustration at the situation was reflected in how quickly that music poured out of him.

"I basically wrote the whole thing the next day and sent it to Simon," Mike says. "I just said, 'Isn't this what Empire State Bastard was meant to sound like?'"

Little did the right-wing troglodytes that had been making his life hell know what they'd unleashed. Simon was all in on the music Mike had sent him, describing hearing it as "liberation". Two tracks from that creative rush, furious grindcore ragers *Dick Privilege* and *Rat Catch*, were release as a single by Mike's band, Vennart, but Biffy's commitments meant it would take the pandemic-enforced pause on the world before they were able to give it their full focus.

"It's sad that it took that to happen, but we were never going to just shit it out," says Simon. "Everything happens for a reason."

The result of this decade of deliberation is *Rivers Of Heresy*, a record that they produced themselves wherever and whenever time and studio availability allowed, in what Mike calls "a totally fucking DIY, bedroom project, no-bullshit kinda way". It covers a surprising amount of musical ground – grindcore, hardcore, drone metal, art metal, doomy post-punk and pretty much everything in between – packaging it all up in 10 short, savage songs.

Mike's riffs range from the brutal and distorted to the deceptively complex (fans of Oceansize will recognise

Metal? Simon Neil and Mike Vennart bloody live and breathe it

traces of that band's DNA here), while Simon's banshee screech – used sparingly in his regular band – sounds utterly unhinged here. Despite his easygoing demeanour, he says he has "a lot of piss and bile" inside him, and Empire State Bastard has given him the chance to vent his frustrations at the world in a way that Biffy Clyro don't.

"I was sure that post-Brexit, post-Boris, post-pandemic, things would get better and we'd come together," he says, sighing. "We have to come together because the world is dying and all we have is each other. There were things I needed to express that I just cannot understand, and I saw it all over that year. Usually, we're on tour, we pop in and out again and live in our little bubble, but this was the first time I felt I was immersed in this shit our leaders have brought to this country."

Empire State Bastard's line-up is completed by bassist Naomi Macleod of Dublin post-punk-influenced trio Bitch Falcon and former Slayer drummer Dave Lombardo, a man Mike calls "the greatest metal drummer ever".

"THERE WERE THREATS MADE AGAINST MY FAMILY"

MIKE VENNART

"I wrote these songs with Dave Lombardo in mind," says the guitarist. "I kept saying when we were demoing it, 'It should have a Dave Lombardo fill here.'"

"He mentioned it so much that we just thought, 'Fuck it, if we want someone like Dave Lombardo, why not just try and get the actual Dave Lombardo?'" says Simon with a laugh. "We sent the songs to Lombardo and he came back straight away and said, 'This is fucking awesome, I haven't heard a metal record like this in a while, I have to be a part of this. I'm so busy, but I'll make time.' We wondered if we just loved it because we love weird, heavy music. When you get that back from Dave fucking Lombardo! My god!"

Speaking to *Metal Hammer*, Dave Lombardo explains that he knew Biffy Clyro from sharing various festival bills with them over the years.

"You naturally go and check the bands out, so I'd been listening to their stuff," says the drummer, "but I'd never have thought anyone from that band would reach out to me. I got into a Zoom meeting with Simon and Mike – we had a hell of a great time just chatting about what we were gonna do. I'm very honoured they reached out to me to work with them."

Mike sent his rough guide tracks to Dave. He describes getting the finished versions back as "just one of the greatest moments of my life… I didn't need to do anything to them at all – they were perfect."

Even that paled next to playing with Dave in the flesh when the four of them convened in a rehearsal room in Yorkshire ahead of their debut three-date mini-tour in March 2023.

"As soon as he hit that first cymbal, I was like, 'Oh my god! Dave Lombardo is playing drums in this room!'" says Simon excitedly. "Me and Mike have been lucky to play with some incredible drummers, but that was something else."

Empire State Bastard played their first ever show on March 26, 2023 at the Glasgow Cathouse, the first of three UK dates. Mike says that even though no one there had heard anything other than their 170-second-long debut single, *Harvest*, the show felt special.

"There was a palpable sense of celebration, anticipation, trepidation, because this was essentially an imaginary band for a decade," he says. "It was weird, because everyone was there, and they had only heard one song, so you could tell they were a bit like, 'What are they going to sound like?' and similarly we were walking on going, 'What do we sound like? We've hardly met each other!' I actually wasn't nervous; this band just feels like the answer to a lot of questions for me."

For Simon, being back in such small venues and able to play with such looseness after years of huge festival and arena stages was a breath of fresh air.

"The whole thing is that this music is on the cusp of falling apart at any given moment," he says. "It has to feel like it's bursting out of our fucking chest. I don't want to do a 30-date tour and halfway through we're tired and we're 'performing'. It has to be real."

Both men are aware that there will be cynics who look at their respective CVs – and especially the fact that Simon is a member of Biffy Clyro – and pigeonhole them as musical tourists. Mike Vennart has a message for metal's gatekeepers.

"I am a fucking gatekeeper of metal, mate!" he splutters. "I'll tell you what is heavy and what isn't."

"Most people in our position would make an acoustic record, because it's easy," says Simon with a snort. "This is something that has been in Mike and I's bones for decades. This music is in our DNA. If some cunt isn't going to listen to it because I wrote a few ballads [in Biffy], then I don't want their fucking ears. We made this because it was screaming to get out of us. If you want to listen to it, I think you'll enjoy it… if you don't, go fuck yourself."

Quite. No compromising, no backing down, no playing it safe. Empire State Bastard are everything heavy music should be. Right wing trolls be damned.

EMPIRE STATE BASTARD'S *RIVERS OF HERESY* IS OUT ON SEPTEMBER 1 VIA ROADRUNNER

ILLEGITIMATE SONGS

The extreme metal albums that shaped Empire State Bastard

Siege – Drop Dead (1984)
Mike: "It's a kind of proto-grindcore album. It's just a barrage of chaos. I love that, and it was very much the inspiration for the first song I did on the Empire State Bastard album."

Will Haven – El Diablo (1997)
Simon: "I spent £18 to get it on import, and it changed my fucking life. I actually got to sing *I've Seen My Fate* at King Tut's in Glasgow when Grady was ill and they played. I got so excited I jumped offstage, hit the barrier and broke my rib. I did the whole song in agony, doubled over, then went to hospital. I wasn't going to miss my chance to sing with them."

Converge – Jane Doe (2001)
Simon: "Probably one of the first real out-there hardcore records I heard. Jacob Bannon is fucking crying from the inside of his soul. I love the mix of it. Don't get me wrong, I used to love Biohazard, but I like my hardcore fucked up."

Napalm Death – Throes Of Joy In The Jaws Of Defeatism (2020)
Mike: "I've known about Napalm Death since I was at school, but had never really gotten into them. I checked out this record, because I was back in that frame of mind, and I thought, 'Where have I been? Have they always been this good?' They're hitting this non-traditional, non-gimmicky, heavy-as-fuck realm, and they have an actual message. They walk it like they talk it. I fucking love 'em, man."

Sunn O))) - Monoliths & Dimensions (2009)
Simon: "I've got a Sunn O))) tattoo. This is the one where they get a bit more three-dimensional, rather than just the Sabbath frequency worship."
Mike: "It's very relevant to what this [Empire State Bastard] record does. It's that saturation of the guitar, it feels like you're in a sonic bath. There's choral and brass stuff on there, but it's still really dissonant. It's an absolute masterpiece."

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EDITED BY: JONATHAN SELZER • PICTURE: JOHN McMURTRIE

Empire State Bastard: Simon Neil and Mike Vennart reveal their dark side

EMPIRE STATE BASTARD

Rivers Of Heresy

ROADRUNNER

Members of Biffy Clyro recruit Dave Lombardo for a soul-dredging debut

EMPIRE STATE BASTARD were conceived on a Biffy Clyro tour bus roughly a decade ago, as the Scottish band's frontman Simon Neil and long-time live guitarist Mike Vennart shared their tastes in extreme, obscure music. Biffy, though, were never quite like this, even back when they specialised in stop-start anti-anthems and bit like a jaggy snake. Everyone always knew that Simon could scream, but here it's like he's dredging the blackness out of his soul and spitting it out for all the world to hear. And Mike, who is the chief musical composer in the project, keeps listeners suitably on edge throughout.

RIVERS OF HERESY KEEPS LISTENERS SUITABLY ON EDGE THROUGHOUT

"I set about making the most fucking poisonous vile music I possibly could, just unabridged hatred in musical form," he says of the mindset that led to this extraordinarily vicious album.

The line-up is completed by live bassist Naomi Macleod from Bitch Falcon and a drummer you might have heard of: Dave Lombardo. There are a couple of moments on *Rivers Of Heresy* – particularly on *Palms Of Hands* and segments of *Sold!* – where the Slayer legend's propulsive double bass underpins a raging thrash metal torrent. It's perhaps his time in avant-metal supergroup Fantômas that is more relevant, though, as Empire State Bastard mine a multitude of different approaches.

Opener and single *Harvest* slams into life on a succession of harsh, sludgy riffs as Simon shrieks, *'We're flirting in the park / Snorting ketamine / Like I'm supposed to.'* It's a beautifully ugly introduction but far from

PRESS

one-dimensional, as alt rock guitars jab and weave while the screams are interspersed with semi-spoken parts and vocal yelps straight from Mike Patton's wordless Fantômas playbook.

Blusher is less than three minutes of grinding noise, before *Moi?* changes the tone with a slow, sparse bass and the first moment of recognisably modern Biffy-style clean singing in Simon's Ayrshire accent. Even so, there's a creeping sense of paranoia about it, even before the filthy stoner riffs start to land and the vocals degenerate back to screams. And then there's the stunning *Tired, Aye?*, which sees the vocalist riding an irresistible Lombardo groove with no guitars or other layers to get in the way. If you've got one of extreme music's most revered drummers onboard, you might as well show him off, right?

Mike Vennart clearly knows his way around a subgenre or two, and there are hints of everything from Melvins' tortuous sludge metal to Converge's furious hardcore, not to mention the songs and segments that defy any easy categorisation. It all ends with the claustrophobic progscape of *The Looming*, which seems to meditate on mortality under a growing weight of noise and little plinks of electronic melody that shed a little light in the darkness.

Rivers Of Heresy might have been 10 years in the making, but it's more than worth the wait. This is a superbly twisted debut, and an album that's hopefully only part of an ongoing journey. 'Mon the Bastard!

FOR FANS OF: Converge, Melvins, Fantômas

PAUL TRAVERS

AKERCOCKE
Decades Of Devil Worship
PEACEVILLE

Maverick devilry live from the (actual) Underworld

The first thing that leaps out about *Decades...* is that it sounds more vicious and punishing than many bands' studio albums. Must be the Devil's work. It also helps that Akercocke were on blistering form at Camden's The Underworld, one sweaty night in 2007. Playing songs from their first two classic albums, *Rape Of The Bastard Nazarene* and *The Goat Of Mendes*, they turned the venue into a full-blown riot of sophisticated, Satanic thuggery. It's absurdly exciting from start to finish. Everything from a furious *Hell* to a progged-out and pitiless *Ceremony Of Nine Angles* smashed another nail into Christ's forearm, while also bringing the ceiling down with sheer brute force. Lads.

FOR FANS OF: Suffocation, The Antichrist Imperium, Voivod

DOM LAWSON

THE ARMED
Perfect Saviors
SARGENT HOUSE

Detroit's eclectic deviants find more hooks among the mayhem

The fifth album from Detroit's masters of misdirection purports to be their "completely unironic, sincere effort to create the biggest, greatest rock album of the 21st century." It's a cornucopia of guitars, pianos, synths, drums, glockenspiels, and flutes. The Armed's hyperactive chaos is still present, but the hooks are given more emphasis than ever before. *Clone*, *Everything's Glitter* and *Patient Mind* are aggressively euphoric, as noise rock collides with massive summer tunes, while *In Heaven*'s soft vocal harmonies and smooth sax are heavenly. *Perfect Saviors* is gleefully anarchic and deceptively catchy, marking another musical evolution for this idiosyncratic outfit.

FOR FANS OF: Queens Of The Stone Age, Lightning Bolt, The Mars Volta

REMFRY DEDMAN

BEES MADE HONEY IN THE VEIN TREE
Aion
MAGNETIC EYE

German psychedelic doom crew blur their palette

It's clear that Bees Made Honey In The Vein Tree know who they are and who they want to be. Third album *Aion* sees the band spread and sprawl within comfortable parameters, frequently occupying sonic and psychic space that's midway between Sleep and the meditative murmur of Om. It's not all stoned riffing, though. Ambient thrum plays a significant part, as does a brand of dappled post-rock that's equal parts Explosions In The Sky and Year Of No Light. It immerses you almost instantaneously, but this is actually *Aion*'s one significant flaw; its instant familiarity means you can drift through without fully engaging, missing fine details that a more individualistic approach might have brought into sharper focus.

FOR FANS OF: Sleep, Carlton Melton, Kyuss

ALEX DELLER

ALT BLK ERA are in charge of their own destiny

ALT BLK ERA

Freak Show

SELF-RELEASED

Nottingham's outsider aggravators storm the alt metal citadels

ALT BLK ERA only started writing music during the pandemic, but the teen duo have already established themselves as one of the UK's most exciting new noises. Over the last 18 months, the Nottingham sisters, Nyrobi and Chaya, have released a stream of singles, introducing a kaleidoscopic sound that pulls from nu metal, punk, hip hop and electronica. It's already won them props from Bring Me The Horizon's Oli Sykes and a slot at this year's Glastonbury, where they performed on the Shangri-La stage alongside Skindred and Ho9909.

Now, while their debut EP, *Freak Show*, barely scrapes the 15-minute mark, it has a lot to say. Over five genre-mashing tracks, Nyrobi and Chaya scream, rap and sing their experiences as POC fighting for their place in the alt scene – both as fans and artists – joining peers Nova Twins who are pushing metal in a more diverse direction. *'Who'd you think you are to dismiss us?'* drawls opener *I'm Normally Like This*, which takes to task "normies" and the gatekeepers who protect the historical whiteness of alternative music, over gnarly bass and urgent, euphoric beats. *'Did they make you vindictive?'*

Misfits : SOLAR, and its horrorcore, choral-infused twin *Misfits : LUNAR*, address that same subject of fighting to change preconceptions of what a rock star should be and look like. Nyrobi comes close to hyperventilation on the former, ranting: *'We're the freaks you talked about / Damn right you'll shut your mouth / Used to being so left out / Raging with the misfits now.'*

While these tracks bear the influence of artists ranging from Lady Gaga to rappers Ashnikko and Rico Nasty, call-to-arms *Oggy* is a nu metal-steeped anthem that urges anyone who has *'hidden themselves in the scene'* to step forward and take their space, *'You're not alone, there's a million of me'* dropped like a bomb in its midst. This is music that will start conversations and keep the revolution burning.

FOR FANS OF: **Nova Twins, Ashnikko, The Prodigy**

DANNII LEIVERS

BLUT AUS NORD

Disharmonium - Nahab

DEBEMUR MORTI PRODUCTIONS

Avant-metal standard-bearers dive deeper into the abyss

If 2022's *Disharmonium – Undreamable Abysses* was an ungodly descent into the Cthulhu mythos, Blut Aus Nord's follow-up is the sound of the Great Old Ones hatching from the void. *Nahab* teems with lurching, dread-filled emanations such as the genuinely terrifying *Mental Paralysis*. Crawling with a palpable sense of terror and unease, these are majestic symphonies of mind-altering cosmic horror. At the album's densest moments, BAN seem to shape air itself, sculpting ethereal portals for an army of cephalopod feelers filtering through the swirling fug. It's potent nightmare fuel, and another hallucinogenic instalment from the best black metal band on this world, or any other.

FOR FANS OF: **Deathspell Omega, Portal, Imperial Triumphant**

SPENCER GRADY

CASKETS

Reflections

SHARPTONE

Leeds' post-hardcore quintet get emotional on the dancefloor

Weaving post-hardcore with synth-infused breakdowns, Caskets aren't reinventing themselves on their second album, although there are *some* signs of evolution, particularly on the more synth-heavy tracks. *By The Sound* and *Too Late* elevate Caskets' emo sensibilities into a sonically weightless and poppy realm. The bouncy, almost effervescent flow of *In The Silence* and *Believe* is bright and infectious. While *Reflections* sounds familiar, it's a reliable burst of airy alt metal – and sometimes an emotionally charged boogie is what we all need.

FOR FANS OF: **Holding Absence, Dayseeker, Normandie**

EMILY SWINGLE

CELESTIAL SANCTUARY

Insatiable Thirst For Torment

CHURCH ROAD

Brutal, atmospheric DM from the Cambridgeshire quagmires

All the relentless touring following this Cambridgeshire death metal quartet's 2021 debut album has evidently paid off. The band sound even more crushing on their second full-length, as is immediately apparent from the scorching, evocative leads and frantic riffing that kicks off opener *Trapped Within The Rank Membrane*. The band's sound is still as mosh-friendly as before – check out that irresistibly chunky groove on *Biomineralization (Cell Death)* – but tracks like the excellently titled *Swivel Eyed And Gurning In The Shadows* bring both a darker atmosphere and a more hectic pace to the table with ferocious blastbeats and eerie, spectral solos. Their debut was a solid effort, but *Insatiable Thirst For Torment* is an all-round tighter, more dynamic and self-assured beast.

FOR FANS OF: **Undeath, Bolt Thrower, Obituary**

KEZ WHELAN

PRESS/FABRICE GAGOS

THE CIRCLE
Of Awakening
AOP

Artful introspection from former Wintersun guitarist

Bursting onto the scene in 2021, this "art metal project from the depths of Germany" were founded as a means for former Wintersun shredder Asim Searah to spread his wings creatively. Drawing on melodic death, doom and black metal, *Of Awakening* is a dark and brooding concept album about reflection, self-hatred and egoism, re-emerging on the other side slightly battered but not broken. Among the five cathartic and crushing tracks, guest performances from violinists Lisa Wende and Ne Obliviscaris's Tim Charles add an extra layer of pathos to the likes of the title track and opener *Ruins, My Dying World*, while Asim's mix of powerful growls and Mike Patton-like croons are impressive throughout. Saving the best for last, the symphonic and Celtic folk-tinged *Ashes And Fading Tides* confirms The Circle are shaping up to be real contenders.

FOR FANS OF: Wintersun, Darkest Era, Shores Of Null

EDWIN McFEE

CREAK
Depth Perception
PROSTHETIC

Newcastle's deathcore heavies go for the electro-shock approach

With one of the fattest guitar tones this side of an Emmure album, Newcastle's Creak have made one of the most thuggishly ugly debut albums you'll hear all year. Their mix of deathcore, nu metal bounce and electronics isn't going to win any awards for subtlety, and how much you enjoy *Depth Perception* will depend on how much you like having your face pushed into the mud and then repeatedly getting the back of your head stamped on… sonically speaking, of course. If it's 38 minutes of pure aural terrorism you're after, then you need to investigate *Hare In The Woods*, *Restless Dreams* and the truly maddening title track. Creak have created something impressively punishing on their first full album. Nice work.

FOR FANS OF: Graphic Nature, Heriot, Vended

STEPHEN HILL

CYHRA
The Vertigo Trigger
NUCLEAR BLAST

Ex-Amaranthe and In Flames members fail to fully ignite

The term 'supergroup' feels a touch too grandiose to describe Swedish metallers CyHra. It's something more humble. Singer Jake E left his former band, Amaranthe, because he felt like a spare part, while ex-In Flames guitarist Jesper Strömblad stepped away from playing to pursue recovery from addiction. On their third record, they've yet to find a clear sense of who they are away from their former associates. Away from the headache-inducing trappings of Amaranthe's trio of singers, Jake E's clean vocal shines, particularly on the hooky chorus of *Live A Little* and *The Voice You Need To Hear*, the latter verging on modern pop ballad. *Buried Alive* and *1.000.000 Fahrenheit* are serviceable melodic metal tunes, but with the exception of *Ashlight*'s welcome change of pace in the form of a positively groovy break-down, *The Vertigo Trigger* is a modest offering at best.

FOR FANS OF: Amaranthe, In Flames, Kamelot

CATHERINE MORRIS

DAEDRIC
Mortal
FIXT

Industrial, gothic drama fashioned from Elder Scrolls lore

Having 70,000 views on YouTube before the debut album's been released is a formidable start for this Dallas, Texas-based *Elder Scrolls*-inspired musical project. Otherwise known as artist Kristyn Hope, Daedric's eclectic MO is rooted in electronic metal, but ferociously packs all manner of contrasting elements along the way. From *Wretched*'s synth-driven grandeur and soaring choruses to the industrial-licked riffs of goth-stomper *Alchemy* – all awash with darkened atmospherics – to the seamless vocal transitions that dance all over the title track, these 10 songs positively buzz with emotion. *Sepulchre*'s harsh crescendo of clattering noise is cut through with ethereal cries, while the rhythmic sway and foot-tapping drama of closer *Coldharbour* is chock-full of vocals that veer between the soulful and the searing. *Mortal*'s musical vitality ensures that each spin will impart new layers and a lasting impact.

FOR FANS OF: Spiritbox, Void Chapter, Skold

SOPHIE MAUGHAN

Asking Alexandria deny that their career has strayed off course

ASKING ALEXANDRIA
Where Do We Go From Here?
BETTER NOISE MUSIC

Yorkshire's rollercoaster metalcore troupe go back to the future

ASKING ALEXANDRIA HAVEN'T given their fans an easy ride in the 14 years since they released their debut album, *Stand Up And Scream*. There have been unapologetic changes in style, from feisty, electronics-laced metalcore to increasingly pop-laden radio rock, as well the shifts back and forth between frontmen Danny Worsnop and Denis Stoff that forced followers to take sides. However, this eighth studio album, still with Danny at the helm and produced and mixed by Matt Good (Hollywood Undead, From First To Last), features some undeniably catchy songwriting and a much sought-after nod to their more aggressive past.

AA's newly favoured direction was already made clear with *Bad Blood*, a big and bold single with a snarling singalong chorus and heavy production, satisfyingly packed with riffs and blastbeats. However, as songs get more melodic and radio-friendly, the band could well be mistaken for Fall Out Boy or even Maroon 5, not least during the particularly quirky, polarising and strangely memorable single *Psycho*. Meanwhile, the super-sticky synth-tinged standout *Things Could Be Different*, metalcore charmer *Feel* and the surprisingly fast-paced industrial punk track *Kill It With Fire* are great fun. *Dark Void* is a touch overworked and dreary, but it's impossible not to sing along to the gentle closing title track – a ballad that builds into a euphoric state and shows off Danny's silky, vulnerable vocals.

Asking Alexandria stress that they worked hard to incorporate parts of many prior albums here, and in doing so they've produced some chart-worthy anthemic stadium rock songs. *Where Do We Go From Here?* also achieves something fans have craved for a long time: glimpses of the heaviness that made this inherently emotional band so beloved in the first place, albeit doused with some hefty doses of modern electronic influences.

FOR FANS OF: Fall Out Boy, Architects, Sleep Token

NIK YOUNG

PRESS/WOMBAT FIRE

Cryptopsy have gone beyond the pale with their latest album

CRYPTOPSY

As Gomorrah Burns

NUCLEAR BLAST

Canada's tech-death masters find the fun amid the frenzy

WHEN HISTORY ASKS Montréal brutal tech-death OGs Cryptopsy how they spent their pandemic, the answer will involve sole original member Flo Mounier increasing velocity on his drums; guitarist Christian Donaldson engineering/producing half the albums released since 2020 (give or take); bassist Oli Pinard joining *another* band, Cattle Decapitation (he's also in Akurion, Vengeful and Neuraxis); and vocalist Matt McGachy keeping the alcohol industry afloat. His beer- and metal-focused podcast, *Vox&Hops*, is now north of 400 episodes. The culmination of the above – plus the 11 years since their last full-length and five since *The Book Of Suffering* EPs – is *As Gomorrah Burns*' dizzying maelstrom.

On the surface, the band's eighth album is just that, consisting of the million notes and beats crammed into every growling minute inherent to high velocity, technical death metal. But more intensive listens will reveal what separates Cryptopsy from the majority of that cohort. *Lascivious Undivine* opens with a full-court press showcasing Flo's continued hummingbird wing battery and Christian's streamlined grind/noisecore riffing style. The trick being that these redline capacities – not to mention Christian's panning wizardry – are employed towards a cohesive greater good that's as much *Rust In Peace* as Dying Fetus's *Reign Supreme*. *Godless Deceiver* and *Ill Ender* may possess head-spinning aptitude, but the jagged stops-starts, fretboard gymnastics and Matt's demonic-spawn ululation are sculpted into songs that are, dare it be said, as fun as they are challenging.

As Gomorrah Burns stands out when it dares to move beyond the pale, mixing in sludgy, tectonic plate grooves on *Praise The Filth* and slappin'n'poppin' autobahn funk on *The Righteous Lost*. Those moments are blended into a half-hour of complex explosiveness of the sort that will have nearby bomb squads donning protective suits.

FOR FANS OF: Cephalic Carnage, Origin, Suffocation

KEVIN STEWART-PANKO

EXMORTUS

Necrophony

NUCLEAR BLAST

Bombastic West Coast neo-classical thrashers take a darker turn

Where Exmortus have previously evinced a Manowar-esque love for all things steel, their sixth album takes a slightly darker path. The sword and sorcery isn't entirely abandoned – *Mind Of Metal* is about Saruman for Ilúvatar's sake – but elsewhere there are werewolves and zombies and things that go bump in the night. Musically, the Californians still attack their ghoulish subject matter with as much bombast as ever. Adopting Yngwie Malmsteen's 'more is more' approach, they pile solos and classical motifs atop choppy thrash riffs, both the pace and heaviness proving relentless. There are moments when the embellishments overpower the songs, but in general their newly undead shred works just fine.

FOR FANS OF: Warbringer, Children Of Bodom, Powerwolf

PAUL TRAVERS

FIDDLEHEAD

Death Is Nothing To Us

RUN FOR COVER

Melodic hardcore luminaries find their collective sweet spot

Fiddlehead have an impressive pedigree, featuring members of Have Heart, Basement and Stand Off, among others. The band don't stray too far from the well on their third album, but they do lean more into the late 90s/early 00s melodic hardcore. This is a very good thing, with the careering, uplifting, air-punch of *True Hardcore (II)* and *Queen Of Limerick*'s half-time bounce recalling legendary punk bands such as Samiam and Hot Water Music at their boisterously emotional best. Clocking in at less than half an hour, this is a short, sharp, fat-free love letter to melodic hardcore's greatest period.

FOR FANS OF: Small Brown Bike, Touché Amoré, Hot Water Music

STEPHEN HILL

GODTHRYMM

Distortions

PROFOUND LORE

Ex-MDB members immerse themselves in their sorrows

Though his 15-year tenure with My Dying Bride has passed, for Godthrymm guitarist/vocalist Hamish Glencross the legacy endures. Drummer Shaun Taylor-Steels is also an alumnus, while their second album *Distortions* features their former vocalist Aaron Stainthorpe on mournful epic *Follow Me*. Hamish's cracked-throat sorrow complements wife Catherine's glacial vocals and funereal keys, seeking to define a legacy of their own. The production is a noticeable step up from their 2020 debut *Reflections*, offering sharper contrast between dour, crushing riffs and mellifluous melancholy. The second part of their Visions trilogy, *Distortions* takes a large step forward in the development of Godthrymm's sound: at this point more self-defining than it is genre-defining.

FOR FANS OF: Pallbearer, Crypt Sermon, Windhand

TOM O'BOYLE

PRESS

HOLDING ABSENCE
The Noble Art Of Self Destruction
SHARPTONE

Cardiff's post-hardcore quartet find a route out of trauma

Holding Absence have never shied away from tackling life's deeper subjects. This final part of a trilogy discussing loss, and the lessons learned from trauma, showcases unrivalled energy from the start. Lucas Woodland's shouting vocals pierce through a near-silence to immediately grab attention. What follows is a heartfelt declaration of the struggles of mental health packaged into an aggressive pop-rock offering that any fan of the scene should pick up. Ash Green's drums are mixed impeccably, allowing them the space to punch through the album's loudest moments, and are especially prevalent throughout energetic tracks such as *Death, Nonetheless*. This may be the closing of a chapter, but Holding Absence's future is bright.

FOR FANS OF: Caskets, Boston Manor, Being As An Ocean

CHERI FAULKNER

HORRENDOUS
Ontological Mysterium
SEASON OF MIST

Philly's dread-steeped death metallers continue their evolution

Having begun worshipping at the altar of old-school death, these Philadelphians' fourth album, *Idol*, saw them fully embracing the Chuck Schuldiner philosophy of exploratory super-technicality. The unpredictability and impressive skill remain on their latest, as the final songs demonstrate. The descent into lunacy of *Exeg(en)esis* and encroaching menace of *The Death Knell Ringeth* evoke Horrendous's cosmic horror fascinations perfectly. But with tips of the hat to Priest and other leaders of metal's classic zenith, *Ontological Mysterium* is also a far more accessible affair. The mutant thrash of *Chrysopoeia (The Archaeology Of Dawn)* comes equipped with swathes of melody and clean vocals. But Matt Knox and Damian Herring's twin melodic leads on *Preterition Hymn*, which morph into gorgeous chants and an acoustic outro, are the most effective and radical arm of this continued evolution.

FOR FANS OF: Death, Voivod, Obscura

ADAM BRENNAN

MARC HUDSON
Starbound Stories
NAPALM

Dragonforce frontman gets animated on his solo debut

Twelve years ago, British power-metal kingpins Dragonforce chose a complete unknown to replace singer ZP Theart and now, four albums later, he's stepping out alone. This solo debut is described as "a sparkling, anime-inspired power metal ride, heavily inspired by both Japanese music and video-game soundtracks". So far so familiar, then, and the trajectory of *Starbound Stories* often collides with that of the mothership. However, with former bassist Frédéric Leclercq plucking the low notes and the most recent Dragonforce album *Extreme Power Metal* now four years old, this is an accomplished set that their fans will embrace. A cast that includes members past and present of Seven Spires, Japanese band Ryujin, Azure and Falling In Reverse accentuates the whirlwind enthusiasm of the man at the centre of it all.

FOR FANS OF: Dragonforce, Rhapsody, Stratovarius

DAVE LING

INCANTATION
Unholy Deification
RELAPSE

East Coast deathly veterans reassert their supremacy

There are few bands that every death metal diehard can agree on, but Incantation should be one of them. Definitively brutal and atmospheric since 1989, John McEntee's crew have never made a bad record. But even by their own lofty, genre-defining standards, *Unholy Deification* is an absolute beast. Boasting the heaviest and most vivid production in their history, Incantation's 13th studio effort sounds imperious from the opening seconds of *Offerings (The Swarm) IV* and stays that way for the next 40 minutes. Every riff leaves a scar and every foul detour reaps rewards. *Homunculus (Spirit Made Flesh) IX* and *Convulse (Words Of Power) III* build grotesque new temples from the ashes of old-school monoliths, with John conjuring demons and condemning souls with his ageless, commanding growl. Eliran Kantor's artwork is spectacular, too. The whole package, then, straight from Hell.

FOR FANS OF: Immolation, Tomb Mold, Undeath

DOM LAWSON

SMALL MERCIES

Where EP is short for 'Epic Potential'

AAWKS/AIWASS
The Eastern Scrolls
BLACK THRONE PRODUCTIONS

A high-concept split in tribute to Russian mystic Madame Helena Blavatsky. Aawks's lysergically unbound doom is well-suited to the subject matter, while Aiwass alternate between hushed reverence and asphyxiating crush.

TOM O'BOYLE

IMPERIAL TIDE
Existence In Crisis
MASCOT

Abrasive metallic hardcore with filthy full-pelt screams, jagged fretwork, and bursts of electronics. This EP has the spirit of a Tasmanian devil and the sound of an attacking Rottweiler. Code Orange fans, hunt this down.

NIK YOUNG

ALLAMEDAH
Alma
UPRISING

This pigeonhole-phobic, Portuguese quartet continue to push boundaries on their new EP. It's an enjoyable stew of crunching nu metal guitars, soaring vocals and fado flourishes, mixed with a sprinkle of Euro cheese.

EDWIN McFEE

KNIFE BRIDE
Don't Dream Too Much
SELF-RELEASED

Each of these three short tracks are reminiscent of early Spiritbox. There's an underlying tone of malice punctuated with soaring clean vocals, but Mollie Buckley's stunning screaming deserves more of an outing.

CHERI FAULKNER

ATREYU
The Moment You Find Your Flame
SPINEFARM

Atreyu have crafted a tour of their sonic palette. From *Immortal*'s dark, writhing fury to the glowing *Gone* to *I Don't Wanna Die*'s introspection, they've delivered a comprehensive slew of metalcore anthems.

EMILY SWINGLE

UNCLE DAVE'S BISCUIT BARREL
...Goes Apeshit in Your Laundry
SELF-RELEASED

A debut EP that's half trad metal, half crossover thrash, and covers topics like bishops, James Dean and self-pleasuring. There's a new candidate for 'Most Batshit UK Metal Band'.

ELLIOT LEAVER

Dethklok prepare for their final reckoning

DETHKLOK

Deathalbum IV / Metalocalypse: Army Of The Doomstar

WATERTOWER MUSIC / ADULT SWIM

Animated death metal overlords get their long-awaited send-off

A MONSTER HIT between 2006 and 2013, *Metalocalypse* was one of the few TV shows in history with real metal credentials. Creative mastermind Brendon Small is a genuine diehard, and his fictional band – Dethklok – were always meant to be a serious proposition. After four seasons of the wildly successful animated series, three albums released under the Dethklok banner, Brendon was thwarted in his plans to make a fifth season and has been promising a full-bore return ever since. Nearly a decade on, here it is. Stop being a "dildo fuckhead", as Dethklok drummer Pickles would say, and strap yourselves in.

A standalone sequel to *Metalocalypse: The Doomstar Requiem* (the original era's grand finale), *Army Of The Doomstar* **[8]** is more of the same, but weirder still. Dethklok are back and planning a world tour. An encounter with a drug-guzzling spiritual guide ends with burly frontman Nathan Explosion nobly committing to write "the Song of Sal-fucking-vation" – the only thing that can save the world from the impending Metalocalypse.

What follows is brilliantly twisted, frequently psychedelic and only occasionally incomprehensible ("Nothing makes sense!" a bewildered Nathan Explosion observes at one point). King Diamond, Amy Lee, Kirk Hammett and Scott Ian all make appearances, and there are proper actors (Mark Hamill! Malcolm McDowell!) involved too. Most importantly, *Army Of The Doomstar* is very, very funny and may even tug a heartstring or two. The synthwavey soundtrack is killer. But keep away from Dr. Rockzo. What the fuck.

Meanwhile, Dethklok's first album in a decade, *Deathalbum IV* **[7]**, maintains the band's tradition of being far better than they should be. Daft lyrics and songtitles (*Poisoned By Food*) aside, everything Brendon and drumming mainstay Gene Hoglan do is catchy, precise and mercilessly heavy. *Aortic Desecration* and *Deadface* are well-crafted and crushing, and Brendon's guitar solos are out of this world. This 'klok is still ticking.

FOR FANS OF: Cannibal Corpse, Testament, Suffocation

DOM LAWSON

KNIFE

Heaven Into Dust

NAPALM

German speed metallers prove infectious on the second album

These German hoodlums had only just formed when the pandemic hit. Knife clearly used this time wisely, immersing themselves in bonkers Teutonic speed metal and cranking out a panoply of wild, thrashing aggro-punk riffs. This beefier second album shifts things up a gear, rocking a bit more steadily and confidently, vocalist Vince Nihil urgently ratcheting the insistent intensity of his scratchy yelp. Arrangements, tempos and atmospheres are more varied, but there's still plenty of monomaniacal d-beat neck-wrecking here. As you can tell from the copious, orgiastic soloing, it's way more classic metal than punk, thus a bit classier.

FOR FANS OF: Midnight, Destruction, Toxic Holocaust

CHRIS CHANTLER

MONASTERIES

Ominous

SEEK & STRIKE

UK tech-death newbies still in the nuts'n'bolts stage

After a trio of EPs, this tech-deathcore outfit are looking to up the ante on their debut album. They've brought some friends along to help out, with Ingested's Jay Evans and Aborted's Sven de Caluwé turning in explosive cameos on *Spiralled Icon* and *Fatal Design* respectively. The band themselves show moments of real potential, too. *Six Behind Bars* chugs along menacingly, and the cleanly sung end to *Heaven Failed Us* is a lovely twist that injects some variety. Unfortunately, much of the album is one-paced and formulaic, failing to live long in the memory. The end result is that, despite some good ideas, *Ominous* as a whole doesn't pass the 'Merely decent' portion of the dial.

FOR FANS OF: After The Burial, Shadow Of Intent, Veil Of Maya

ELLIOT LEAVER

NAKED LUNGS

Doomscroll

SELF-RELEASED

East Ireland noise rockers ratchet up the anxiety

The debut album from these County Wicklow-bred noisepunks aims to recreate the emotions you feel while scrolling through an endless cycle of negative media. Calling to mind the dark humour of Whipping Boy and the righteous rage of early Gallows, *Doomscroll* perfectly captures the power of the band's uncompromising live show, and it's a thrilling, sometimes chilling soundtrack for these anxious times. Driven by corrosive guitars and impassioned howls, *River (Down)* is a highlight, as is the nightmarish and cinematic *Shell*. Elsewhere, frontman Tom Brady trades his mix of spoken word and screams for more melodic vocals on *Boo Boo* and the grungy, gloomy effort's hook, *'I love the things that make me cry'*, is an absolutely anthemic moment.

FOR FANS OF: Gallows, JAAW, Whipping Boy

EDWIN McFEE

PRESS

NIXIL
From The Wound Spilled Forth Fire
PROSTHETIC

US black metallers make a beeline for oblivion

Nixil's black metal stands in opposition not just to society, but to material existence itself, their second album voraciously welcoming liberation from the flesh. The Baltimore quintet brought in guitarist/backing vocalist Alden Bradstock after the release of 2021's slicker debut *All Knots Untied*. *From The Wound...* ups the sense of chaos, the production retaining clarity without polishing off the jagged, bloody edges. Opener *Collapsing The Poles* invokes oblivion. Its snarling riffs, ragged blasts and reedy leads strike an effective balance between dissonant ferocity and a sharp, hook-laden structure. *In Thrall* slows to a smouldering reverence, while the title track combines both approaches. A feral, rhapsodic call to the void.

FOR FANS OF: Watain, Dissection, Uada

TOM O'BOYLE

OUTERGODS
A Kingdom Built Upon The Wreckage Of Heaven
PROSTHETIC

Raised By Owls and Evil Scarecrow members get deadly serious

Two-fifths of Outergods – vocalist Sam Strachan and guitar player Alex LeGrice – are members of grindcore scallywags Raised By Owls while Jordan Williams drums for Evil Scarecrow. This project is, however, anything but a laugh. Lyricist and co-guitarist Nathe Sinfield uses their debut album's maelstrom of black metal, grind and noise to express his grief after "an immeasurable bereavement." At a brisk 34 minutes, *A Kingdom...* boasts some concise cuts, but it's best when its longer songs switch between subgenres. *Into The Howling Void* complements shrieks and blastbeats with sly melodeath riffing, before the atonal guitars of *Faceless Entities* squeal and disorientate. By the time the title track accelerates from death-doom to grind, it's clear Outergods have a full arsenal of ways to punish your earholes.

FOR FANS OF: Full Of Hell, Fukpig, Raised By Owls

MATT MILLS

POLARIS
Fatalism
SHARPTONE

High-rising metalcore crew re-emerge in the wake of tragedy

Having already released two solid albums, and following their Main Stage performance at this year's Download, Polaris stand poised to step up into metalcore's A-list. The Aussies' third album resoundingly delivers the atmospheric, groovy and melodic metal required to make the jump, although it's impossible not to view *Fatalism* through the lens of tragedy following the sudden, tragic death of guitarist Ryan Siew, who passed away in June, aged 26. *Fatalism* is his towering legacy: *Nightmare*, *Parasites* and *Overflow* are sharp and emotive, brimming with all the inventive, technical flourishes that mark Polaris out as metalcore's next great hopes, while closer *All In Vain* is almost five minutes of bubbling, serrated tension, build and release. *Fatalism* is a bittersweet listen: both Polaris's best work yet, and a sad reminder of what the metal community have lost.

FOR FANS OF: Architects, Bury Tomorrow, While She Sleeps

DANNII LEIVERS

PRIMAL FEAR
Code Red
ATOMIC FIRE

Germany's power metal diehards get back to business as usual

Primal Fear have long held a reputation echoing the hoary German stereotype of ruthless efficiency, turning out solid, self-assured Teutonic power metal product on a reliably biennial basis. The three years separating this 14th album from its predecessor is the biggest release gap in the band's 26-year history, necessitated by co-founding bassist Mat Sinner recovering from a life-threatening illness. Having faced that down, naturally it's back to business as usual: the chrome-plated production packs a gleaming wallop, the band's three guitarists get plenty of meaty melodies to chew on, and Ralf Scheepers hits every high note with conviction. *Code Red* sounds very familiar indeed, stacking up the usual ratio of one-part front-loaded attention-grabbers (the symphonically enhanced *Cancel Culture* scampers with vituperative vigour) to two parts middling plodders – although overall the standards do feel higher than usual.

FOR FANS OF: Judas Priest, Helloween, Powerwolf

CHRIS CHANTLER

Dying Fetus make another date with the Grim Reaper

DYING FETUS
Make Them Beg For Death
RELAPSE

Maryland's death/grind grand masters keep their blades sharp

IF THERE'S ONE thing you can't accuse Dying Fetus of, it's deceptive advertising. Between their shock-jock name and the album's blunt-force title and artwork, you'd have to be a fool to think you're getting anything else but a stick jabbed right in your eyeball and a chainsaw ripped through your guts.

Since 1991, the Baltimore band have had a revolving door line-up that rivals even Megadeth, but the one through-line over the decades has been founder and frontman John Gallagher. His rutting farm-animal grunt has become the band's trademark. Even in a field rife with pig squeals and phlegm gargles, his particular timbre remains singularly revolting. He spews with youthful enthusiasm all over *Make Them Beg For Death* – an album that will repel 98% of the human race. But for old-school death metal enthusiasts, it's just what the (mad) doctor ordered.

Since their inception, Dying Fetus have teetered between the technical and the primitive, and both are on flagrant display here. Songs veer from chaotic grindcore to crunching, mid-paced technical death metal with zero warning. It's like that Lithuanian 'Euthanasia rollercoaster' you've read about, only with blastbeats. While certainly not a band chasing after hit singles, this album does have its compulsively repeatable moments. Opener *Enlighten Through Agony* is pure 80s death metal carnage. *Feast Of Ashes* is at once catchy and completely disgusting, with fluid guitar heroism knocking headfirst into grimy death-grind. There is also a massive breakdown a minute and a half into *Undulating Carnage*, wherein John rolls out a 30-second bear growl while a tasty Bay Area thrash riff chugs away in the background. It's at this point when you realise you are truly in the presence of masters. Nine albums and over three decades in, Dying Fetus still enthral and repulse.

FOR FANS OF: Cannibal Corpse, Skinless, Aborted

KEN McINTYRE

PRESS/TRACEY BROWN

Kvelertak have a bunch of new tricks up their sleeves

KVELERTAK

Endling

RISE

Norway's prized noiseniks throw yet more toys into their pram

SEEMINGLY SEEKING TO embody the spirit of the trickster god Loki, Kvelertak have carved a career from defying expectations while crafting some of the world's fieriest, *funnest* heavy metal. Fifth album *Endling* is no exception, delivering what you want from a Kvelertak record along with plenty you didn't even realise you'd been craving.

Take opener *Krøterveg Te Helvete*, for example. It takes four minutes just to get its bloody *intro* out the way, before lurching into a bout of honky-tonk rawk'n'roll that sounds more like the New York Dolls than a band snorting church ashes and stolen skull fragments. True, the band's signature sound – think the bombast of Turbonegro or The Hellacopters colliding with Immortal – is always within easy reach, but the scope and scale often seem grander than ever before. *Likvoke* shows how effortlessly Ivar Nikolaisen has bedded in, his portentous snarls soaring above glorious guitar heroics like something bat-winged flung up from the pits of Hell. The title track, meanwhile, seems to lob in a snaggletoothed Hüsker Dü melody, while epic closer *Morild* is a miniature rock opera in its own right.

This isn't, though, to suggest it's pure plain sailing. *Døgeniktens Kvad* cackles its head off as it deploys some *Cotton Eye Joe* banjo, before flinging in choral melodies and what sounds worryingly like windchimes. If this stretch just about works, then *Skoggangr*, with its blend of Status Quo, Queen and post-rock most certainly doesn't – though it's at least a travesty of such ostentatious proportions that it's in keeping with an album that delights in taking one wild swing after another. That this batshit approach doesn't descend into chaos or parody is mystifying, but also part of Kvelertak's thrilling appeal. It's a wild, bulge-eyed ride into the maelstrom, and fingers crossed it doesn't end any time soon.

FOR FANS OF: Midnight, Burning Love, Fucked Up

ALEX DELLER

PRINCESS ALICE MANOR

Outer Demons

SELF-RELEASED

Brighton's eclectic artiste spreads a powerful trans message

Plucking influences from electronicore and emo to J-Pop, *Outer Demons* is Princess Alice Manor's bid for crossover appeal. From the anthemic thunder of the title track and *monSTarR (I know What You Are)*'s nu metal-flecked riffs to the industrial stomp of earworm *Alive*, this album offers an irresistible slew of bangers. *Fear (Trans Anthem Pt. III)* sits somewhere between Lordi and The Prodigy, as goth-soaked theatrics meet hair-raising synths and Alice delves deep into her own parental trauma to seek emotional catharsis. This rising artist shines a light on trans issues via her chaotic melange of thought-provoking cuts.

FOR FANS OF: Scene Queen, We Butter The Bread With Butter, Electric Callboy

SOPHIE MAUGHAN

REZN & VINNUM SABBATHI

Silent Future

BLUES FUNERAL RECORDINGS

Doom/psych voyagers merge their transmissions

Chicago cosmic doomers Rezn join forces with Mexico City space-heads Vinnum Sabbathi in search of transcendence. The former's dreamlike doom combines organically with the latter's spoken word samples from science fact/fiction and meandering instrumentals. *Hypersurreal* makes the most of both bands' strong points, opening with a vengeful riff that returns periodically amid a swirl of atmospherics and soundbites. Any time the record pushes beyond quiet/loud dynamics and into adventures as unbound as the psychedelic squall of *Morphing*, they're on to a good thing. From two bands already pretty out there in their own right, *Silent Future* reveals an alchemy they could push yet further.

FOR FANS OF: Spaceslug, MWWB, Elephant Tree

TOM O'BOYLE

RINGWORM

Seeing Through Fire

NUCLEAR BLAST

Metallic hardcore mainstays keep their batteries fully charged

It's impressive that a Cleveland metallic hardcore band formed in 1989 have grown more powerful with each release. Giving a respectful, strong nod to their roots but feeling more fresh and fierce than ever, this album boasts some truly exhilarating songwriting and the production is just the right level of raw. As ever, James Bulloch fronts tracks with relentless caustic ferocity. Meanwhile, Voivod's Daniel Mongrain offers a guitar solo on *Death Hoax*, and *Playing God* proves a uniquely emotive way to close. With fast riffs, hooks and beatdowns, Ringworm have pulled all the best elements of thrash, grind, hardcore and speed metal into an intoxicating whole. It's a challenge not to headbang from start to finish.

FOR FANS OF: All Out War, Integrity, Merauder

NIK YOUNG

WORLD SERVICE

Heavy metal uprisings from around the globe

ARAV KRISHNAN

The Fallen System

SLIPTRICK

Guitarist/vocalist Arav Krishnan has enlisted members of Kerala thrash band Chaos for his thrash/death debut. The likes of *Hidden Agenda* pack plenty of incisive riffs, given weight by a burly mix.

ADAM BRENNAN

IBLISS

Bintang Fajar

HELTER SKELTER PRODUCTIONS / REGAIN

The second LP from these demon-loving Malaysian stoner doomsters is devilishly good. Bolstering fuzz-fuelled riffs and mountainous grooves with Gary Moore-esque blues, Ibliss are in top form.

EDWIN McFEE

REVERENCE TO PAROXYSM

Lux Morte

ME SACO UN OJO / DARK DESCENT

For addicts of the new school of OSDM comes this putrid debut album from Mexico City, festering in the same gunk-encrusted depths as Mortiferum, Tomb Mold and Fetid.

SPENCER GRADY

PRESS

SKÁLMÖLD
Ýdalir
NAPALM

Iceland's Viking metallers venture out of their comfort zone

After six albums, Viking metallers Skálmöld have got their thunderous riffs down pat, ensuring pace and energy never wane. At *Ýdalir*'s crux is *Ratatoskur*, whose triangulation of folk influences, grim rawness and triple-axe noodling is Skálmöld encapsulated. On *Veðurfölnir* the guitars' interplay and tremolo picking creates frenetic joy. *Skuld* pivots towards pacy darkness with a hypnotic beat like a Rammstein dancefloor-filler, then fleetingly delves into doom before cascading into a flurry of riffs. It's a neat moment, but you're left wondering why Skálmöld don't develop those pockets of diversity further. But while there's an appetite for further exploration of musical styles, Skálmöld's strengths are embedded in vital drumming, authentic chants and watertight riffs, for which these Icelanders should be proud.

FOR FANS OF: Metsatöll, Falkenbach, Iron Maiden

HOLLY WRIGHT

SOEN
Memorial
SILVER LINING MUSIC

Sweden's progressive metal powerhouse drum up more power

Finally developing a more rounded viewpoint beyond their homage to Tool, *Memorial* delivers the magic Soen always promised. Cody Ford's crystalline guitar licks are otherworldly on *Unbreakable* and *Hollowed*, the latter a gushing ballad featuring the exquisite vocals of Italian artist Elisa. There are heavier doses, too. The kinetic groove on opener *Sincere* is one shining example, and elsewhere the metalised bent of *Violence*, followed by *Fortress*'s modern metal immediacy, collectively give *Memorial* a new level of accessibility. The album also owes its success to the lyrical treatment, which, once overstuffed with Joel Ekelöf's missives, now basks in breathing space. Drawing from crushing metal and epic balladry works wonders, as on the sublime upsurge of *Tragedian*, but the jewel in their crown is *Vitals*. It's Joel's Mike Patton-doing-*Easy* moment, and *Memorial* could be their *Angel Dust*.

FOR FANS OF: Tool, Anathema, Leprous

HOLLY WRIGHT

SPIRIT ADRIFT
Ghost At The Gallows
CENTURY MEDIA

Texan lords of trad metal reach regal status on album five

Spirit Adrift are now close to the pinnacle of the New Wave Of Traditional Heavy Metal – the grassroots new-old-school movement that's been gaining momentum for more than a decade. On this, their fifth album in seven years, the Texans are confident enough to throw in some intros that mischievously invert much-loved leitmotifs from the 80s. The nods to *Sweet Child O' Mine* on *Death Won't Stop Me*, *Wasted Years* on *Barn Burner* and *Crazy Train* on *I Shall Return* are audaciously blatant, these specific reference points seemingly evidence of a band keen to flee their underground restraints and impact on album charts worldwide. They deserve it, too; for all the 80s Rock 101 homages, *Ghost At The Gallows* has a profundity and ingenuity all of its own, particularly in the two eight-minute bookends, dramatically flagging up the band's distinctive strengths.

FOR FANS OF: Metallica, Corrosion Of Conformity, Ozzy Osbourne

CHRIS CHANTLER

STITCHED UP HEART
To The Wolves
CENTURY MEDIA

West Coast rockers draw new inspiration from the darkness

This LA rock band are still settling on their most authentic sound, but their latest album benefits enormously from being the heaviest and darkest to date. *To The Wolves* does great justice to charismatic frontwoman Mixi's emotive vocals as they move smoothly from sultry to melodic to downright aggressive. She's at her finest on *Possess Me*, which also boasts fun fretwork and industrial influences. While her talent is impressive throughout, some tracks are stronger than others. *The End* is uniquely charming and *Immortal* is edgy, fast-paced, and steeped in snarls and screams. Tracks of this calibre make catchy but less-distinctive tracks like *Conquer And Divide* and *Thunder* less engaging by comparison. This eclectic album shines strongest when Mixi's anger spills over and the band's energy is at its highest.

FOR FANS OF: Flyleaf, Icon For Hire, My Ruin

NIK YOUNG

Orbit Culture have finally cracked the colossal groove code

ORBIT CULTURE
Descent
SEEK AND STRIKE

Sweden's deathly groove metallers plot a steep trajectory

AFTER SEVERAL ALBUMS of accomplished odes to their country's imperious metallic pedigree, 2020's *Nija* finally put more eyes and ears on deserving Swedes Orbit Culture. Follow-up EP *Shaman* further tantalised with its marrying of dynamics with irresistible hooks, but it just scratched the surface of what is fully realised on their fifth full-length.

Descent sounds enormous. Countless bands have attempted to recapture the overwhelming effect of Metallica and Pantera grooves over the last 30 years without sounding clichéd or derivative, yet Orbit Culture may just have struck gold. Led by Niklas Karlsson's commanding roar, the band adeptly combine varying strands of melodic death metal with synths, electronics and the likes of Parkway Drive's muscular modern might, and no element feels incongruent or forced. Strings and choirs add drama to the powerful opening combo of *Black Mountain* and *Sorrower*, with the latter's ascent to epic realms evoking Insomnium's windswept heroism, before *From The Inside*'s epic chime emerges from a dominant industrial stomp.

Authoritative rhythms propel *Alienated* and *Vultures Of North*, as dissonant electric thrum and dancefloor-filling beats are delivered as a dense wall of sound by a sterling mix. Such is the quality of the anthemic builds, it's a shame that Niklas's raspy clean vocals just lack that distinctive power to cement the likes of *Undercity* in the mass consciousness, but *The Aisle Of Fire*'s simple refrain that arises from another whirlwind of righteous riffs and propulsive drums should be carried by the massive crowds this music is designed for.

As bands like Lorna Shore, or even Gojira, have proven, breakthrough moments aren't always immediate. They take time, talent and effort for the stars to align. With *Descent*, Orbit Culture may have finally lit that all-important spark.

FOR FANS OF: Gojira, Soilwork, Parkway Drive

ADAM BRENNAN

PRESS

Shepherds Reign fuse tradition with a mission

SHEPHERDS REIGN

Ala Mai

GOLDEN ROBOT

Polynesian groove metal powerhouse prepare an international wake-up call

HOW DID IT take 50-plus years of heavy music history for a band to figure out that a haka is metal as fuck? It's the sound of deep-throated Polynesian blokes shouting and stomping, commonly heard before the Samoan rugby team steamroll over everyone else on the pitch. Put some guitars and drums in there and you're set! This is precisely what Shepherds Reign did in December 2019, and they soon went viral. Their monstrously burly single *Le Manu* currently boasts more than three million views on YouTube and almost as many Spotify streams. It was a near-instant breakthrough for a band who, when they released their debut album just 15 months prior, didn't find much fanfare outside their native New Zealand.

Ala Mai will doubtlessly be met with more intrigue than its predecessor. Not only does it contain Shepherds Reign's online hit, but it sees the groove metal juggernauts delve deeper into their culture and personal lives. Intro track *Samoa O La'u Fesili* is a traditional Samoan song about finding happiness within your family, then *Aiga* forcefully continues the same theme, imbued with melodic riffs and imposing vocals.

The album is at its best when – as with the percussive title track and fiercely anti-colonialist *Samoa Mo Samoa* – it balances earnestness with distinctly Polynesian metal. However, at an excessive 13-song runtime, *Ala Mai* is also bloated with clichéd cuts. *Cold Summers Night* and *Never Forgotten* carry intense themes yet sound like run-of-the-mill ballads able to slot into any Shinedown or Five Finger Death Punch record, while *Finally* could be a generic Sepultura B-side.

Ultimately, there are only 40 minutes of excellence in this hour, turning an album that had the potential to affirm this band's stardom into something that's sadly hit and miss. Shepherds Reign could still do something special, but we need more focus and fury from their sonic onslaught.

FOR FANS OF: **Sepultura, Alien Weaponry, Five Finger Death Punch**

MATT MILLS

TEGMENTUM

Evolvement

M-THEORY

Cosmically-minded brutalists forge a new tech metal alliance

Featuring members of Fallujah, Dawn of Ouroboros and Narcotic Wasteland, Tegmentum aren't easing their way in with their debut album. A concept release about creating a cosmic balance between light and dark, *Evolvement* crosses prog metal with elements from more extreme territories such as technical death. It's realised well, especially on the track *Amygdala* and the nine-minute closer *Gospel Of Sand*, where Michael Ball's fret expertise meshes beautifully with the raw power of Chelsea Murphy's screams. With plenty of layers and surprises like bursts of violins and sax, there's a lot to uncover on multiple listens.

FOR FANS OF: **Amorphis, Born Of Osiris, Obscura**

ELLIOT LEAVER

TILL THE DIRT

Outside The Spiral

NUCLEAR BLAST

Atheist frontman finds a new, mind-melting path to progress

As a founder member of Atheist, Kelly Shaefer has presided over some of the most progressive records in death metal's history. Till The Dirt is a new project, but the ethos remains the same. *Outside The Spiral* is rooted in DM, but infected with a crazed, melodic streak that brings a new atmosphere to his trademark complexity. *Insist And Demand* channels Triptykon's askance doom through a kaleidoscope of blastbeats, while *Forest Of Because* is Southern-fried groove metal with a hard-on for evil. As an added bonus, legendary producer Scott Burns came out of retirement to lend Kelly a hand, and bass virtuoso Steve DiGiorgio gets his fretless freak on for the mind-bending title track. A new force awakens.

FOR FANS OF: **Atheist, Howling Sycamore, Gojira**

DOM LAWSON

TO KILL ACHILLES

Recovery

ARISING EMPIRE

Scotland's post-hardcore braves claw their way to catharsis

To Kill Achilles are dragging themselves out of the gutter and into a new era. While desperate heart-on-sleeve hardcore still permeates their sound, there's a thread of hope that holds *Recovery* together. The record follows a narrative of growth, *...And I'm An Addict*'s brutal depiction of addiction leading into *Chemical Counterpart*'s less tempestuous sonic landscape, transitioning into a state of sobriety. To Kill Achilles nail emotional torment – see the back-to-back punch of *Blue* followed by *Living In A Memory*'s gut-wrenching mourning – but this is a record that emphasises reflection and understanding. As Mark Tindal howls on the closing title track, *'In the past, I've romanticised my fall... well not again.' Recovery* encourages listeners to feel everything, but offers a roadmap to move beyond the pain.

FOR FANS OF: **Dead Swans, Touché Amoré, Defeater**

EMILY SWINGLE

PRESS

UADA
Crepuscule Natura
EISENWALD

Portland's progressive black metallers explode into space

Uada have been pushing black metal's boundaries since their inception in 2014, and with their fourth album they've arrived at their most kaleidoscopic take yet. This is basking music – a tapestry of sound that engulfs and soothes like a warm, violet-scented bath. Some may think this is contrary to black metal's most antagonistic impulses, but Uada sound like a band wholly dedicated to expanding the boundaries of melodic black metal. *Crepuscule Natura*'s five lengthy, space-streaking tracks contain all the expected ingredients – witch-rasp vocals, tremelo picking, lycanthrope howls, jet-fuel propulsion – but you'll also find twin classic rock guitar riffs, windswept prog-doom passages, and a free-flowing psychedelic blackgaze ambience. This is exquisite mysticism and high drama cloaked in black.

FOR FANS OF: Dissection, Hoth, Mgła

KEN McINTYRE

UNCLE ACID & THE DEADBEATS
Slaughter On First Avenue
RISE ABOVE

Stage frights and mind massage from UK's occult rock mesmerists

If Uncle Acid & The Deadbeats never fully capitalised on their early metoric rise – from cult underground sensations to a Black Sabbath support slot within four years – their recent tour with Ghost and headline billing at Desertfest has proved they're still a potent force. Live, the Cambridge four-piece are a powerhouse of mantric, stoner-infused rock that do away with any crowd pleasantries, opting for a focused, deadpan presence that only intensifies their sound and atmosphere. Roughly stitching together two shows from 2019 and 2022 from the First Avenue venue in Minneapolis, *Slaughter On First Avenue* manages to capture their raw essence of nonchalant occult grooves superbly. An hour and a half of pure brain-vegging goodness, featuring a healthy balance of tracks from across their career, including favourites *I'll Cut You Down* and *Slow Death*, the record offers succour for fans still waiting for the follow-up to 2018's *Wasteland* album.

FOR FANS OF: Black Sabbath, Green Lung, Electric Wizard

HYWEL DAVIES

WEREWOLVES
My Enemies Look And Sound Like Me
PROSTHETIC

Precision-ripping death/black attacks from the Australian outback

Having played together for years now in both The Berzerker and The Antichrist Imperium, bassist/vocalist Sam Bean and guitarist Matt Wilcock's riffing skills are sounding especially taut and fat-free. Throw Psycroptic drummer David Haley in too, and it's no surprise to find this project sounds absolutely savage, mixing the blistering speed of Angelcorpse and the brash "fuck you" attitude of Sadistik Exekution with a crisp modern production. This may be their fourth album in as many years, but the trio still show no signs of easing off the gas – in fact, this is probably their most energetic and abrasive to date. There's no subtlety here, but if you're in need of some evil, no-nonsense blasting, *My Enemies...* certainly hits the spot.

FOR FANS OF: Angelcorpse, Sadistik Exekution, Anaal Nathrakh

KEZ WHELAN

THE WORD ALIVE
Hard Reset
THRILLER

High-end, diamond-hard metalcore from the Arizona plains

Expectations are set to low when *Hard Reset*'s opening track, *The Word Alive Is Dead...* holds a slow 4/4 drumbeat throughout. But those fears are soon dispelled as a thunderous riff cascades around Telle Smith's roaring vocals. The tempo is soon ramped up as the title track kicks in, and we're reacquainted with the classic The Word Alive sound. Layered synths and catchy hooks accompany anthemic choruses, with appearances from members of Bad Omens, Escape The Fate and From First To Last all helping to take the Phoenix metalcore band's seventh album to new, unrelenting heights. Closing track *War With You* crescendos into something truly memorable, with atmospheric string sections and tasteful synths that crash into a monumental chorus. *Hard Reset* is an incredibly strong metalcore album, and one of the best of 2023 so far.

FOR FANS OF: We Came As Romans, Dayseeker, Miss May I

CHERI FAULKNER

Sylosis are laying the foundations for a revival in fortunes

SYLOSIS
A Sign Of Things To Come
NUCLEAR BLAST

Reading's metal powerhouse prove their bona fides once more

IF YOU POLLED UK metal fans and asked them to name the country's most underrated band of the last decade, chances are that Sylosis would come pretty high on the list. The Reading band have been plugging away since the turn of the millennium, and each of their five albums thus far has been a stellar example of catchy, modern, technical thrash. And yet they rarely seem to get much of a raise in profile. Hopefully the dam will burst with *A Sign Of Things To Come*, as album number six continues their excellent run of form.

By now you'll probably know how well-earned Josh Middleton's reputation as a superb guitarist is, but you can't help but feel that his stint in Architects has really helped him learn how to pen more memorable vocal hooks. Opener *Deadwood* is full of meaty, powerful, state-of-the-art thrash, but it features a dexterous vocal from Josh that immediately implants itself into your brain. It's also evident on the more subtle and atmospheric tones of *Absent* – a song you couldn't imagine Sylosis pulling off with this degree of excellence at the start of their career.

Not only is Josh crafting better hooks than ever, but he's surrounded by possibly the best collection of musicians he's ever had alongside him in Sylosis. The rhythm section of Ali Richardson, now a decade into his tenure, and Conor Marshall, who made his debut on 2020's *Cycle Of Suffering*, have gelled wonderfully here, bringing groove, precision and a booming low-end to songs like *Eye For An Eye*.

If Sylosis wanted to make that step from underground darlings into scene heavyweights, then this is the album they needed to nail. And nail it they have. Let's hope the record's title is an omen for the band's full tank of potential, and *A Sign Of Things To Come* gets the love it deserves.

FOR FANS OF: Bleed From Within, Machine Head, Darkest Hour

STEPHEN HILL

PRESS

LIVE REVIEWS

IRON MAIDEN
LORD OF THE LOST

O2 ARENA, LONDON

London's metal overlords return with a show for the ages

Iron Maiden: one of the all-time greats

WHAT AN INCREDIBLE summer of metal it's been. A month after Metallica sent Download fest into ecstasy with a couple of next-level performances for *72 Seasons*, it's the turn of the band that inspired them: Iron Maiden – only this time everything happens indoors, as part of a tour called The Future Past.

Openers **LORD OF THE LOST** are here for the first of two sold-out nights in London, by personal invitation from Maiden mainman Steve Harris. Finishing rock-bottom as representatives of Germany in the Eurovision Song Contest this year, a lesser band might have displayed an injured ego. But with Spotify streams soaring since a globally televised final in Liverpool, witnessed by 162 million viewers, the flamboyant, genre-hopping five-piece from Hamburg instead dwell on the positive.

"Everyone's expecting us to grieve, but we came to Eurovision as ambassadors for heavy music, so we did our job," frontman Chris Harms assured *Hammer* last month. That's fair enough.

Favouring a more moderate outfit than the eye-catching little number that caused such mirth at Eurovision, Chris doesn't say too much to the audience, allowing Lord Of The Lost's largely goth-flavoured sounds to speak for them. Driven as much by the keyboards of the regrettably named Gared Dirge as by Pi Stoffers's clanking guitar, songs such as *When The Curtain Falls*, *The Future Of A Past Life* and *Full Metal Whore* gradually turn ripples of applause into full-blooded appreciation. By the time they reach *Blood & Glitter*, the one song that brings recognition from the most casual of fans, the job is done.

Some 43 years and 16 studio albums since a fresh-faced **IRON MAIDEN**, complete with Paul Di'Anno on vocals, unveiled their now-legendary self-titled debut album at London's tiny Marquee Club, they've scarcely put a step wrong. Everybody knows that Maiden defiantly follow their own path, performing albums in their entirety when the occasion demands – as with 2006's *A Matter Of Life And Death* – but also happy to thrill the fans by celebrating an increasingly glorious array of hits. In 2005, honouring ailing former drummer Clive Burr, they played a set that only included songs from the first four records. The Future Past has to be the band's finest attempt at marrying catalogue highlights: specifically choice picks from album number six, 1986's *Caught Somewhere In Time*, and 2021's acclaimed double album and culmination of a latterday purple patch, *Senjutsu*.

UFO's *Doctor Doctor* lights the blue touchpaper before the band arrive to the strains of the *Blade Runner* theme and launch straight into *Caught Somewhere In Time*. Their entrance is a classic piece of rock theatre, and when Bruce Dickinson hollers "Scream for me, London!" for the first time, the O2 responds in almost deafening fashion. Another track from '86, *Stranger In A Strange Land*, keeps the nostalgia flowing. While his peers are retiring or sliding down a slippery slope, Bruce's voice remains a complete revelation. Cackling like a Bond villain, the ringmaster supreme greets the masses cheerily before introducing *Senjutsu*'s first single, *The Writing On The Wall*.

As the band barrel through two more newies, *Days Of Future Past* and *The Time Machine*, the euphoria doesn't let up. Now on a roll, the Air Raid Siren links the latter song to the 1985 movie *Back To The Future*, Bruce wondering: "Did anyone own a DeLorean sports car? Oh, fuck off – they only sold three." And thus the show's formula is set: a classic tune (*The Prisoner*) followed by a new track. *Death Of The Celts* is quite possibly the defining moment from *Senjutsu*, exhibiting the blood, thunder, mysticism and storytelling that has made Iron Maiden so bloody special.

Can I Play With Madness highlights the oft-overlooked importance of its co-author, guitarist Adrian Smith, while Bruce engages in a sci-fi shoot-out with mascot Eddie during a pulsating *Heaven Can Wait*. Performed live for the first time on this tour, the eight-and-a-half-minute-long *Somewhere In Time* track *Alexander The Great* is nothing less than a show-stopper, and the epic mood continues with *Fear Of The Dark*, by now as much a staple of the show as the vintage tune that follows it, *Iron Maiden*.

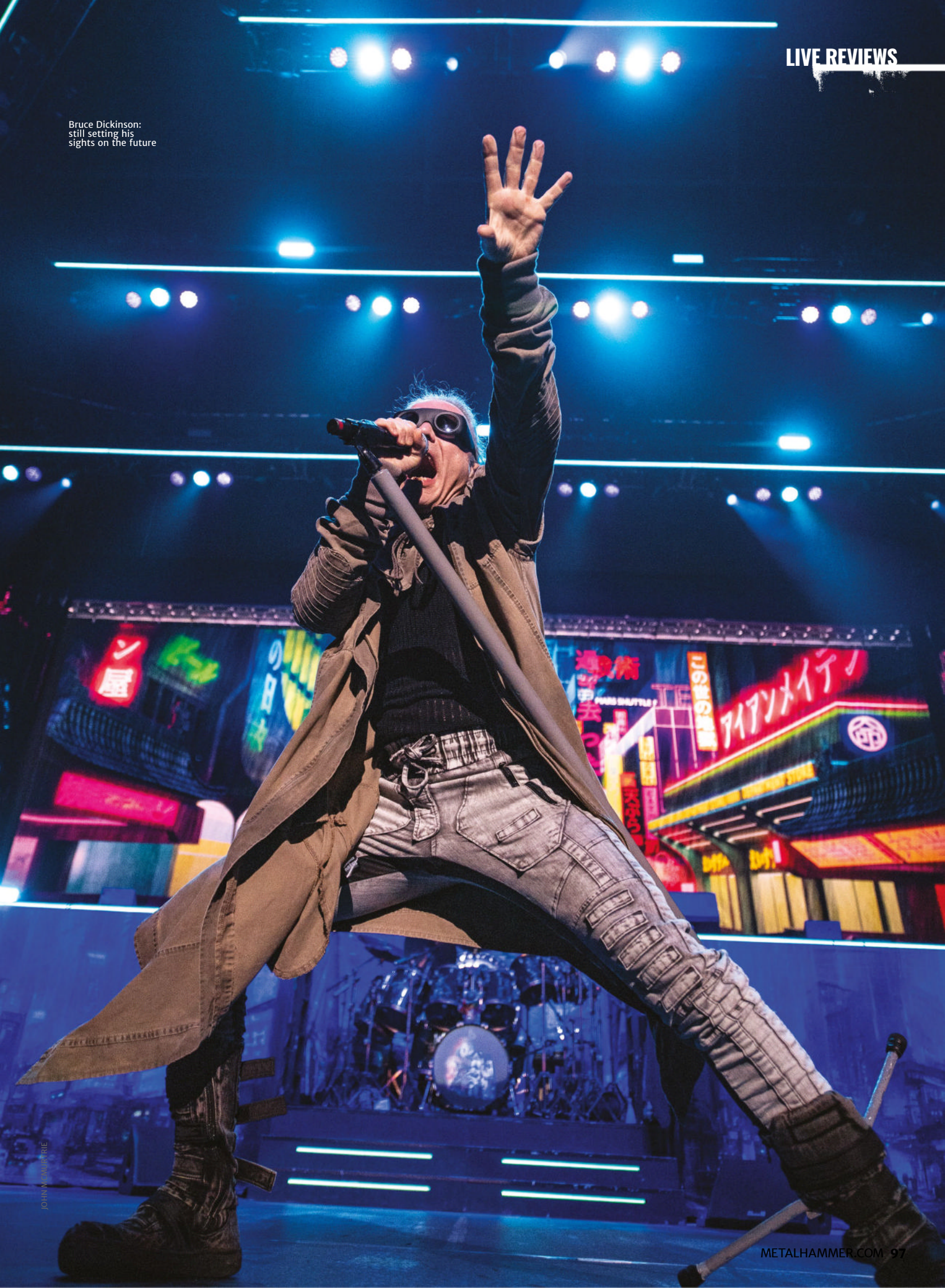
Maiden are bold enough to encore with a new song, *Hell On Earth*, before sending everybody home smiling over the strains of *The Trooper* and *Wasted Years*. This is a perfect show from a band with loads of gas still left in the tank.

DAVE LING

THE SET

IRON MAIDEN
Caught Somewhere In Time
Stranger In A Strange Land
The Writing On The Wall
Days Of Future Past
The Time Machine
The Prisoner
Death Of The Celts
Can I Play With Madness
Heaven Can Wait
Alexander The Great
Fear Of The Dark
Iron Maiden

ENCORE
Hell On Earth
The Trooper
Wasted Years



Bruce Dickinson: still setting his sights on the future

JOHN MCMURTRIE

UK TECH-FEST 2023

NEWARK SHOWGROUND, NEWARK

Loathe, Chelsea Grin and Born Of Osiris take the UK's feast of fret-frenzy for one last spin

FRIDAY

It's been one hell of a decade for UK Tech-Fest. Originally a single day in a sweaty pub backroom, it's gone on to forge a community so tightly knit that it coined its own moniker: the Tech Fam. The confirmation that this would be the festival's swansong in its current iteration has both heightened excitement for this 10th edition and made it bittersweet.

It's day one at the Showground, and the pugilistic grooves, pummelling riffs and visceral screams of Anglo-French bruisers **CAGE FIGHT** offer up a primal overload, as axeman James Monteith runs amok through the circle-pit he incited moments earlier. From an eye-popping slew of onstage cameos to vocals so sublimely plaintive they could reduce onlookers to blubbering wrecks, **EXIST IMMORTAL** are on soul-stirring form. Hull's **SWORN AMONGST** flex their metalcore muscles via downtuned barrages of sinister, lacerating blastbeats and breakdowns that could raise Lucifer from the fiery depths. Dark, stark and utterly immersive, **CONJURER**'s carefully crafted noise ebbs and flows between teeth-cracking intensity and disquieting ambience, as the four-piece combine crushing walls of sludge with expansive, post-metal flourishes.

It turns out that **HACKTIVIST**'s new co-vocalist is none other than ex-Borders man Jordan 'JJ' Olifent. Alongside J Hurley, barbs are spat, and the duo's obscenely exuberant take on Jay-Z & Kanye juggernaut *Ni**as In Paris* invigorates everyone watching. Seven years on from their second stage debut, Nottingham/Gibraltar quintet **THE FIVE HUNDRED** have unlocked headliner status with a set that delivers a sprawling cornucopia of anthemic choruses alongside skin-tingling melodies and djent-spliced rhythms.

With Suffocation forced to cancel due to ill health, it's down to Liverpool's **LOATHE** to close out Friday night in commanding form. Frontman Kadeem France practically dances across the stage as post-rock clashes enticingly with dissonant metal and ambient shoegaze on *Aggressive Evolution* and *Dance On My Skin*, his vocals veering between lung-bursting roars and near-serene cleans. It's a triumph, and a performance that leaves jaws clanging on the sweaty floor.

Cage Fight put the Tech Fam on high alert

THE SET

LOATHE

Aggressive Evolution
Broken Vision
Rhythm
Dance On My Skin
Screaming
451 Days
New Faces In The Dark
Heavy Is The Head That Falls With The Weight Of A Thousand Thoughts
Stigmata
Love In Real Time
Two-Way Mirror
Is It Really You?
Gored
I Let It In And It Took Everything...
White Hot

SATURDAY

Tech-death Mancunians **MONASTERIES** deliver some early afternoon aggression and mind-altering intensity to the Main Stage on day two. Ferocious grooves wrestle with stabbing guitars, tremolo-picked breakdowns and terrifying blasts, as Josh Davies shifts between bowel-shaking gutturals and maniacal screams. **VEXED**'s hyper-focused brutality aims straight for the jugular. Switching flows seamlessly, Megan Targett's multi-faceted cleans and razor-sharp raps are fully galvanised via a boisterous rhythm section, the throat-ripping maelstrom of *Nepotism* ("This one goes out to all the industry cunts") working this full house.

Weaponising metallic sludge, feedback-inducing hardcore and barbarous riffs shot through with thunderous instrumental passages, **HERIOT** ensure our attention is grabbed from the larynx-shredding jump-off, before things go full feral via sludge merchants **ARMED FOR APOCALYPSE**. Their no-frills ferocity lands with equal parts swagger and hardcore-tinged savagery. It's a suitable warm-up for **KUBLAI KHAN TX**'s hardcore assault, which proceeds to propel the main room into crowd-surfing, two-stepping ecstasy. **HUNDRED YEAR OLD MAN**'s penchant for brooding atmosphere is a spine-tingling joy to experience live, as the post-metal sextet marry raw, cathartic screams and crushing guitars with lush, ambient passages, the latter of which is swiftly replaced by the kind of bowel-shaking deathgrind and machine-like precision that only **ABORTED** can dole out. *Cadaverous Banquet* sees the Belgian blast kings at their precision-tooled, bruising best.

BOUND IN FEAR's merciless, downtempo deathcore scratches all itches for the bludgeoning and the bleak, as they all but demolish this second stage. The third time's a charm for modern deathcore titans **CHELSEA GRIN**, whose headlining set is repeatedly halted due to an absolutely fucking batshit crowd – sadly resulting in what looks to be injury, as one punter gets carried out by security during a cacophonous *Recreant*. Collective organs are duly shifted via rumbling bass-drops and monstrous breakdowns, while Tom Barber's bloodcurdling gutturals on vitriolic tubthumper *Fathomless Maw* ensures the band go out into the night in neck-snapping fashion.

SUNDAY

With the festival's final hours rapidly approaching, **GRAPHIC NATURE**'s nu metalcore-soaked set convulses with anguished howls, skittering beats and hulking guitars. There's a modest wall of death to accompany **INVISIONS**' high-octane and aggressive brand of metalcore, before **OCEANS ATE ALASKA** – complete with OG vocalist James Harrison – come barrelling through amid a blaze of lo-fi noise, melodious twists and headbang-worthy grooves. Second stage headliners **SHE MUST BURN** are the perfect juxtaposition of brutality and spine-tingling atmosphere. Technical glitches aside, the sumptuous likes of *Incantation* emphasise the contrasting vocal interplay between gargler Kyle Lamb and classically trained chanteuse Valis Volkova.

There's a sombre air clinging to the Main Stage following a heart-wrenching speech from festival director Simon Garrod, and **BORN OF OSIRIS** are almost overshadowed by the hanky-clutching scenes. Leave it to these Chicago progressive metalcore overlords, then, to rouse the Showground one last time via chugging riffage, vociferous tech-death overtures and a setlist packing hook-laden vocal moments and menacing heft. UK Tech-Fest 2023 – it's been emotional. On behalf of everyone here tonight, may this not be the final goodbye, but merely Auf Wiedersehen.

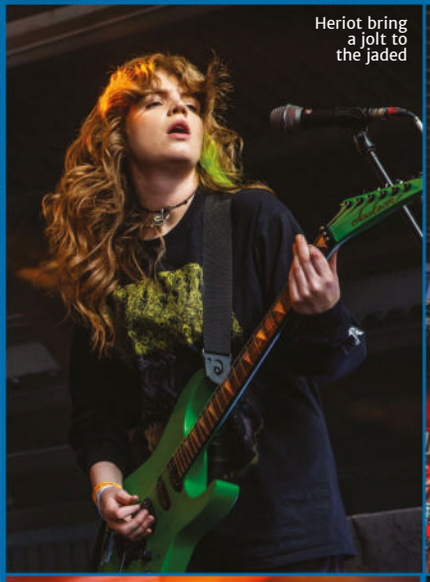
SOPHIE MAUGHAN

PRESS: CAHE FIGHT, LOATHE; IB PHOTO. CONJURER, HERIOT, ABORTED, CHELSEA GRIN, OCEANSATEALASKA, BORN OF OSIRIS; WOUTER VAN DE KAMP.

Loathe: Kadeem France is on white-hot form

Chelsea Grin get incandescent on your ass

Born Of Osiris bring UK Tech-Fest to a spectacular close



Heriot bring a jolt to the jaded

Aborted: all hits, no misses

Conjurer unleash all their fret wizardry

Oceans Ate Alaska aren't ones for navel-gazing

KK's Priest: a glorious return to the metal fold

KK'S PRIEST

PAUL DI'ANNO / TAILGUNNER

KK'S STEEL MILL, WOLVERHAMPTON

Former Priest guitarist forges his empire anew

OVER A DECADE after his unceremonious departure from Judas Priest, it's fitting that K.K. Downing would stage his big comeback – and live debut for his new band – at his own venue. Openers **TAILGUNNER** set the tone, their triumphant NWOBHM-by-way-of-thrash stylings taking off like a 747, as they chuck epic covers of Dio's *Don't Talk To Strangers* and classical composition *In The Hall Of The Mountain King* – with guitars, on a gangway in front of the stage, naturally – in amid energetic originals. Vocalist Craig Cairns declares, "We're here to put British heavy metal back on the map!" With more performances like that, they just might.

Sitting in a wheelchair for his first UK show in a decade, **PAUL DI'ANNO** is triumphant. His band's renditions of his Maiden classics *Wrathchild, Prowler* and *Murders In The Rue Morgue* come almost at double pace, Di'Anno howling with gusto to lend a punkier, more ferocious edge to even the likes of *Phantom Of The Opera* and *Running Free*. "You've made an old man very happy," he says. "Sometimes touring is the only thing that keeps you going; you've kept me alive."

On paper, **KK'S PRIEST** are the Judas Priest your mum says you've got at home, but they waste no time in firmly asserting their own identity with a set that's imperious, energetic and victorious. Huge screens, jets of flame and explosions aplenty make it feel like a stadium show has been squeezed into a warehouse and Tim 'Ripper' Owens's voice is perfectly suited to howling Priest cuts like *Night Crawler, Hell Patrol* and *Metal Meltdown*. A rollicking *Burn In Hell* proves his own tenure in Priest is sorely in need of reappraisal – even if it is the only Ripper-era song to make the set.

But as fun as watching K.K. bust out the classic moves to *Breaking The Law* and *Victim Of Changes* is, the guitarist leaping up onto a podium to solo and grin like a malevolent metal jack-o'-lantern, it's his own songs that feel most potent. Opener *Hellfire Thunderbolt* arrives in a literal blaze of glory while new single *One More Shot At Glory* and roaring closer *Raise Your Fists* tap into the underdog-unifying magic that made Priest so essential in the first place. If you thought K.K. Downing's best days were behind him, you got another thing comin'.

RICH HOBSON

DÖGS OF WAR

THE UNDERWORLD, LONDON

Mötley Crüe are coming full circle tonight. It was in clubs as sweaty and intimate as The Underworld that these Hollywood hedonists first seized the Sunset Strip and inspired a wave of wannabes. Since then, a litany of hits have pushed Vince Neil and co to stadium status, despite irking many with their scandals and that blink-and-you'll-miss-it retirement. They're proving that right now on a co-headline run with Def Leppard. But that passion for intimate spaces is clearly still there, as the band appear under the not-secret pseudonym, **DÖGS OF WAR**. Bassist Nikki Sixx tells the 450 diehards that the outside world – especially the naysayers and music industry businessmen – don't matter right now. The four-piece rally through an hour of anthems, sounding impressively forceful and precise with new guitarist John 5 a fitting live replacement for Mick Mars. There are 80s throwbacks in the form of two dancers/backing singers, and Vince is the real deal, despite recent allegations of lip-syncing at shows. The Crüe may be accustomed to stadium success, but they'll always be best amid the excitement and intimacy of gigs like this.

MATT MILLS

MIDNIGHT

DEVASTATOR / CALLIGRAM

NEW CROSS INN, LONDON

"20 Years Of Hell, Speed & Sleaze!" runs the legend for Midnight's European tour. It marks out not a journey so much as an alignment of forces, whose ongoing potency remains a two-fingered salute to any notion of progress, self-reflection or the addressing of our contemporary ills. In the process, the Cleveland degenerates have amassed a cult, fervent following, gathered as if tonight is a calling. The venue's already packed for **CALLIGRAM**'s combination of clenched, blackened crust and atmospheric excursions, and **DEVASTATOR**'s sulphur-churning, outlaw biker groove revs up the crowd further. But from the minute **MIDNIGHT** linchpin Athenar and his allies burst onstage, leathered up, bullet-belted and faces wrapped in customary black gauze, and *All Hail Hell* hits the room like an injection of pure adrenaline, the scene becomes one of ecstatic, ravenous carnage. Fusing black, thrash, punk and ageless, Stooges-channelled rock'n'roll into the most primal of anthems, songs like *Szex Witchery* and *Satanic Royalty* hit a motherlode that it feels like you've been starved of, and it's akin to *Mad Max*'s Immortan Joe unleashing the water reserves. Refusing to let the moment go, the crowd wills them back onstage for one last blast as vital chaos reigns once more.

JONATHAN SELZER

SHAUN HULME

Spiritbox raise hell at the Roundhouse

Courtney LaPlante takes London through all the shades of emotion

SPIRITBOX

LOATHE / BRAND OF SACRIFICE

THE ROUNDHOUSE, LONDON

Canada's alt metal maestros go large in London

SPIRITBOX ARE THE most hyped newcomers of the last few years. Considering the Victoria, British Columbia quartet only have one album to their name – 2021's *Eternal Blue* – the fact that they've sold out two nights at a venue as prestigious as The Roundhouse, in the blink of an eye, says much about the fervour surrounding them.

BRAND OF SACRIFICE and Loathe are on hand to warm the audience up. The former play a decent set of fairly unremarkable deathcore, but the latter are well deserving of their reputation as one of the UK's finest bands. **LOATHE** have an unusual but welcome set of highly dynamic influences, with modern metalcore, dreamy shoegaze and ambient electronics all making up a piece of their fascinating sonic pie.

It also helps that they look so cool, particularly frontman Kadeem France, who comes across like the lovechild of Chino Moreno, Ol' Dirty Bastard and Curtis Mayfield, and struts around like he owns the place. Carry on like this and he soon will.

Oddly, for a band who have achieved such a rapid rise, there doesn't appear to be any such obvious visual clues that **SPIRITBOX** are one of the hottest properties in the metal world. Obviously, their MVP is vocalist Courtney LaPlante, whose voice can soar to the Sun before crashing back down to Earth and shaking its core with a guttural roar. Her iconic oceanic blue hair is now jet black, and the rest of the band look refreshingly gimmick-free. The matter-of-fact way she interacts with her audience is a hugely welcome change from the tiresome, scripted stage patter of many bands. If it wasn't obvious enough already, it's clear that Spiritbox have got to this level almost solely on the strength of their songwriting chops.

Over the 14 songs they play this evening, most of them showcase a grasp of hooks, nuance and heaviness that their metalcore peers could only dream of, from the snaking melodies of *Secret Garden* to the ascending beauty of *Halcyon* and the relentlessness of breakout single *Holy Roller*, which inspires mass chaos. The packed Roundhouse lap it up, but get even more hot under the collar when Architects frontman Sam Carter arrives onstage for world-class version of *Yellowjacket*. Spiritbox's continued rise seems inevitable. Tonight is proof that it's also well deserved.

STEPHEN HILL

PHOEBE FOX

Kiss chalk up a valedictory victory

Skindred's reach knows no bounds

KISS

SKINDRED

O2 ARENA, LONDON

NYC's shock rock legends bring their long goodbye to London

USUALLY WHEN SOMEONE retires, they get a commemorative clock, bought after a quick whip-round, a card, a few drinks down the local boozer with their colleagues, and then they're gone. Not so Kiss, who have been stringing out their retirement party over multiple continents since it was announced back in 2018. Tonight, despite what some sceptics may believe, is their final ever appearance in London, a seismic event indeed. So it would be rude not to have one last crazy, crazy night with the legendary 70s hard rock icons.

First, though, **SKINDRED** are here to warm the crowd up. And in classic fashion, it's more a pure scorching. Like the headliners, they rarely deviate from a crowd-pleasing formula, but when it's this effective, why change it? Benji Webbe is one of the finest frontmen around, expertly cajoling the initially just-curious crowd into a frenzy. New songs such as *Gimme That Boom* sound great in arenas, and by the time the band reach *Warning* and the Newport Helicopter, everyone is up and spinning their garments as if they're watching the headliners.

Many artists would quiver in fear at having to go on after Skindred, but, as the crowd are reliably informed as they take to the stage, **KISS** are the hottest band in the world. The O2 might not be at full capacity, but it roars with the passion of a South American stadium as the band are lowered from the ceiling and kick immediately into *Detroit Rock City.* It's worth noting how energetic they are for a band of men their age. Sure, they might dress like gods from on high, but they are mere mortals, and for them to power through these songs at such ferocity is immensely impressive. Paul Stanley tells us they have a mix of "Old songs, older songs and the oldest songs," and, while it's an amusing quip, when you have a catalogue that includes *Shout it Out Loud, Deuce, Cold Gin, Lick it Up* (that wonderfully morphs into The Who's *Won't Get Fooled Again* halfway through), *God Of Thunder,* and a closing *Rock And Roll All Nite*, deep cuts and new material are far from a necessity.

Gene Simmons spitting blood, the many explosions, the flying Paul Stanley – however many times you've seen the show already, it still kills. Kiss might be finally hanging up their platform boots at Madison Square Garden in December, but for the UK, this is a show to remember them by.

STEPHEN HILL

TINA KORHONEN

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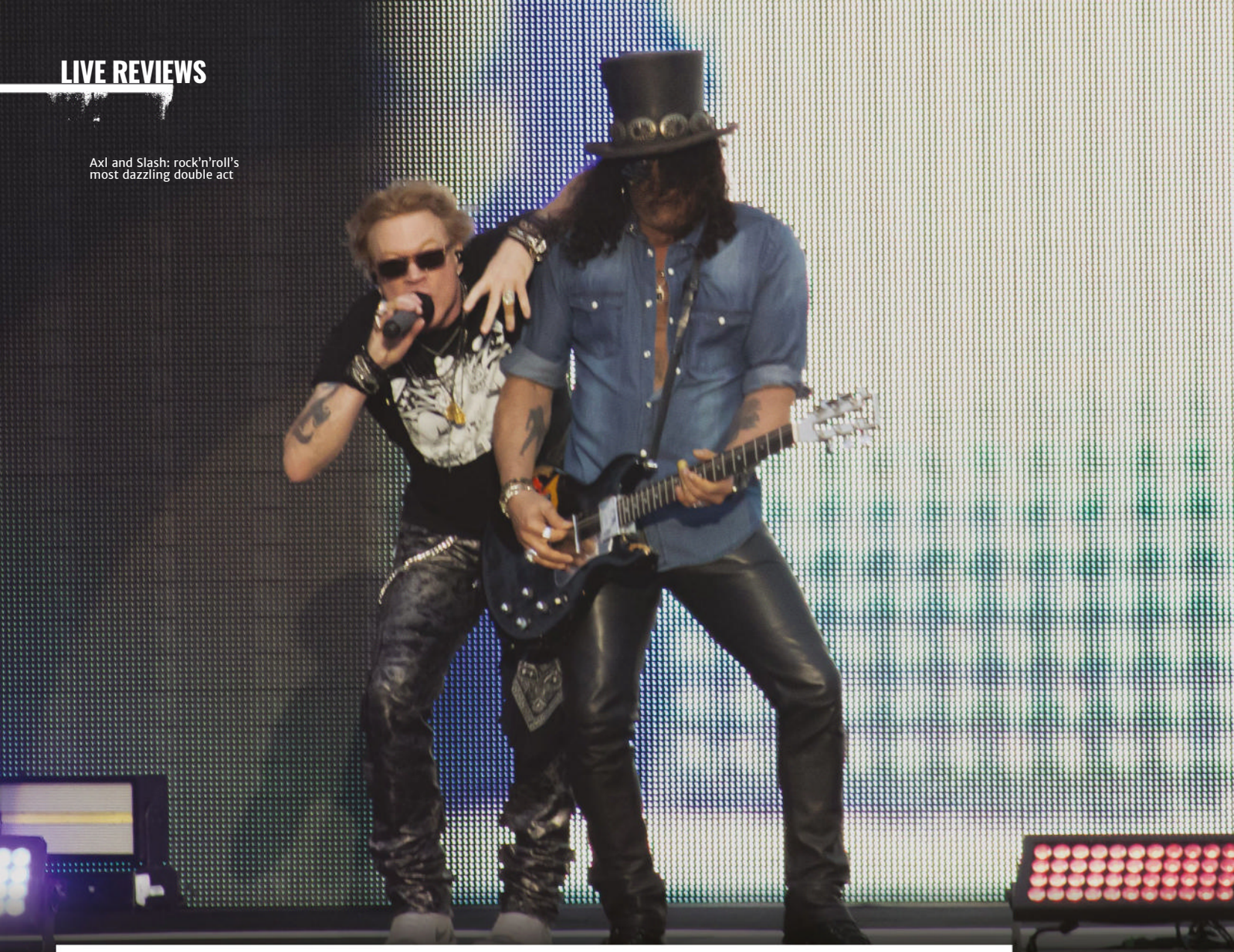

Axl and Slash: rock'n'roll's most dazzling double act

PRESS/GUILHERME NUNES CUNHA NETO

GUNS N' ROSES

HYDE PARK, LONDON

Thrills, spills and a few too many time-fills from LA's rock legends

SEVEN YEARS SINCE Duff McKagan and Slash rejoined the fold, you have to wonder how long Guns N' Roses can steam on without new material to grease the axles (and indeed Axl) before fans feel like they've seen it all before. Mixed reports emerging from the preceding week's Glastonbury headline set lend an air of trepidation before the band arrive, but as they come roaring out with *It's So Easy*, it quickly becomes apparent that fears are at least somewhat misplaced.

Unlike the 210,000 pop fans casting a quizzical glance at the band at Glastonbury, Hyde Park feels much more like a dyed-in-the-wool GN'R crowd, and the roaring singalongs to the band's biggest hits – *Mr. Brownstone, Welcome To The Jungle*, Wings' *Live And Let Die, You Could Be Mine*, the list goes on – attest to their undeniably electric back catalogue. While Duff and Slash's return might have excited fans, a reinvigorated Axl is the most energetic member onstage as he dashes from one side to the other, even slipping over during second song *Bad Obsession* but jumping straight back up with a massive grin.

Granted, there are still some niggling issues. While the 28-song setlist leaves plenty of room for hits, there are clear pacing issues, especially early on as a run of *Mr. Brownstone, ...Jungle* and *Reckless Life* rapidly loses steam with *Use Your Illusion* filler *Double Talkin' Jive* and *Pretty Tied Up*. Against the 'hit' covers – *Live And Let Die, Knockin' On Heaven's Door* – renditions of UK Subs' *Down On The Farm* and The Stooges' *T.V. Eye* feel merely adequate, and Axl's decision to deploy a falsetto on GN'R's version of Velvet Revolver song *Slither* feels like a bad celebrity impression in a set where his voice is otherwise on fine form.

But these moments are like sticks and stones against one of rock'n'roll's most legendary acts. *Civil War* marks a tipping point in the set; dedicated to Ukraine, the clouds release a light drizzle that makes the epic ballad feel even more poignant and cinematic, the effect heightened by 65,000 voices immediately then singing along to the likes of *Sweet Child O' Mine, November Rain, Nightrain* and *Paradise City* and, as the band go all-out for the final half-hour, you can't help but wonder if a shorter set would have served better to capture their unstoppable zeal.

RICH HOBSON

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FIVE MINUTES WITH

DANNY WORSNOP

ASKING ALEXANDRIA

The frontman talks new music, fans having sex at shows, and pissing off conservative Christians in the Bible Belt

WORDS: MATT MILLS

The new Asking Alexandria album, *Where Do We Go From Here?*, is the heaviest the band have sounded since you came back…
"That was by design. Our last album [2021's *See What's On The Inside*] was very much a 'for us' album, where we got to lock ourselves in a studio and create something that we love and are obsessed with. So, I thought, 'Let's do a "for them" album.' Obviously, it's not an accurate gauge looking at comment sections, because people with good souls and happiness inside don't go there, but there are sub-demographics of fans that feel underappreciated. [I thought,] 'Let's switch it up and lean more in that direction.'"

What's the most ridiculous hate comment you've ever read?
"One of the dumbest ones I've ever read was someone talking shit about me and how we should get the original singer back. That's me!"

Have you ever listened to the album that Denis [Stoff, who fronted Asking during Danny's 18-month absence] did with the band?
"No. I wasn't interested at the time and I have no reason to go back to it now. After I came back, I asked, 'Were there any hits from that or anything I need to learn for the shows?' They adamantly said that they had no interest in playing anything off that album. That album is a different band and it doesn't have a place in Asking Alexandria."

You don't listen to metal at all, do you?
"Not even a little bit. My favourite artist is Adele and it's not even close. I listen to a fair amount of rock, like Rival Sons or The Black Crowes, when I wanna feel good and bounce around. When it comes to music, I wanna cry or laugh, basically."

So how did you join a metal band?
"Ben [Bruce, guitarist] reached out and asked me to sing for his band. I said, 'No, I'm a guitarist and you're a stranger on the internet. Stop trying to trick me into coming to a sex dungeon.' Then he gave me the pitch, which was, 'I wanna put this band together and move to America', and I was like, 'I'm in!' I'd been trying to get to America since I was five."

"CHRISTIANS TRIED TO CUT THE BRAKE CABLES ON OUR RV"

Once you made it to America, weren't you banned from a venue in Nashville?
"Yes. It was a very religious venue. The venue was like, 'No crowdsurfing, no moshing, no cursing.' I was incapable of that. 'Fuck' was the first word out of my mouth onstage. They cut our sound and tried to cut the brake cables on our RV, which is a very unchristian thing to do. I think they broke the AC or something."

Weren't you once playing in America and there was a couple in the crowd having sex?
"I think it was in Pennsylvania. I remember it because it was on a balcony. They brought the child they conceived that night to a show."

Please say it was a girl and her name was Alexandria.
"Ha ha! I don't remember."

As a performer onstage, what do you do when you see two people fucking?
"I don't take shows too seriously. I'm here to have fun, so the funnier I can make a show, the better. I don't care about the serious metal stuff."

How's the autobiography coming along? Because you started it when you were 21, right?
"Yeah. I've pushed pause on it. I got to a point where it felt like I'd reached the end of the stories I have to tell, but not what feels like the end of a book. I feel like I haven't reached a point where I'm like, 'That concludes this chapter' yet – especially [back] then! We'd released three albums and never had a No.1 single: I'm not sure that's very autobiography-worthy! Ha ha! That's all very 'first three chapters'."

Do you have any more plans for We Are Harlot or your solo music?
"I haven't spoken to Bruno [Agra, We Are Harlot's drummer] since we got off the last tour. He didn't want to do it anymore and I have no idea where he is. He even blocked me on Instagram. New solo music, I've been writing for the last three years and I'm slowly getting there."

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PRESS

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